

THE TOWNE LOCAL

The Heart & Soul of the South Bay **Chula Vista**

CHULA VISTA ARTS FESTIVAL
CELEBRATES CREATIVITY,
CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

BOYS AND GIRLS CLUBS
OF SOUTH COUNTY
EMPOWERS YOUTH

SOUTH BAY HISTORICAL
SOCIETY PRESERVES
LOCAL HERITAGE

THE ALEXA LIMA

Leading SWC
Journalism
to National Awards!

SEPT 2025 | ISSUE 1

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Writing and Leading Her Way to Success

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The Heart & Soul of the
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Photo by Steve Wood

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PAST, PRESENT FUTURE



JEFF BETTGER
PUBLISHING DIRECTOR

Welcome! We are pleased to present the inaugural issue of The Towne Local Chula Vista. This monthly magazine will present articles highlighting and celebrating the people, places and history of Chula Vista. Issues will include interviews with educators, elected officials, inspiring youths, local artists, non-profit organizations, service clubs, and something fun for children. Each issue is available as a printed version. Current and all past issues will be found at www.TheTowneLocalChulaVista.com. Our goal is to produce a magazine with the highest quality content, layout, and photos that you will want to sit down and read from beginning to end. For those who grew up in Chula Vista but have since moved away, this magazine will be a great way to stay connected.

You may be also interested in our companion magazine www.TheTowneLocalBonita.com which is soon celebrating its one year anniversary.

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

MEET THE TEAM



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Ode To Chula Vista

by Jeff Bettger

Chula Vista, my neighbors, my home
A place so diverse, worthy of a poem

Many families here for generations
Military families here on duty stations

Parkview, Eastlake, Sweetwater baseball
Little League Champions seen by all

Beautiful murals adorn business walls
Diverse artists invite our gaze and awe

Indebted to our Border Patrol
Navy, Marines and medical personnel

Our schools and colleges teaching students
Our hospitals with facilities most current

Proudly stepping out of San Diego's shadow
With empty land left to develop and grow

A bright future brings a university
and a Bayfront to rival any city

With skilled workers and international trade
economic progress continues to be made

We thank our past and present leaders
Of our Chula Vista, we could not be prouder

MCCANDLISS ARTS AWARDS



I began this magazine with a couple of goals. The first was to celebrate the amazing history, people and places of Bonita. The second was to announce local art exhibits, poetry readings, book releases, etc. The third was to increase literacy among children.

You can imagine my happiness to find out that my efforts recently won an award. At a July City of Chula Vista Council meeting, I received the Gail McCandliss Arts Award for the Literary Arts. The award was officiated by the City of Chula Vista Cultural Arts Commission. The Literary Arts McCandliss award, "Recognizes achievement in the literary arts by an individual whose work has helped build better community understanding

and appreciation of the literary arts in Chula Vista."

I shared the event with Bonita Vista High School student Sofia Petroulias, who received the Rising Star Award for, "artistic achievement by a youth age 16-21 in the visual, performing, and literary arts." Sofia is an outstanding singer and actress who won rave reviews as Gloria Estefan's sister in the recent Southwestern College production of the musical "On Your Feet".

Trevor Braaten, also a Bonita Vista High School student, received the Distinguished Service in the Arts Award. Trevor was recognized for "community service by an individual or groups

who have volunteered time and donated resources in support of the arts in Chula Vista." Trevor single-handedly took on the responsibility of starting and directing a third choir at Bonita Vista High School.

Before these awards were presented, it was our pleasure to witness Mayor John McCann officially declare July 22, 2025 as Alexa Lima Day. Alexa is a newly graduated student at Southwestern College where she was Editor-in-Chief of the school's newspaper, The Sun. Alexa led her staff to the most prestigious national awards, in which they competed against other colleges and universities (see our full story in the Dec. 2024 issue www.TheTowneLocalBonita.com).

Shown left to right: Alexa Lima, Sofia Petroulias, Trevor Braaten, Jeff Bettger

Proud Recipients of McCandliss Arts Awards!





GREAT FUTURES START HERE

With more parents working these days, the need for quality and safe afterschool programs is critical. Boys & Girls Clubs have provided such programs throughout the United States for many years. The local branch, Boys & Girls Clubs of South County, is headed by Stephanie James.

JEFF: Hi Stephanie. Thank you for your time. To start, please tell us a little about yourself.

STEPHANIE: Hello! My name is Stephanie James. I'm the President/CEO for the Boys & Girls Clubs in South San Diego South County. We serve communities of Chula Vista, Imperial Beach and San Ysidro. I'm the first female and first Latina CEO for our organization and the second Latina CEO for Boys & Girls Clubs in San Diego County. I have been with the Club for twenty-two years and three years in the role of President/CEO. It has been an amazing and impactful experience. Having grown up in this community, I am proud to serve the community that raised me. Being able to pay it forward and shape the future of youth that share similar journey as myself is rewarding.

I think it is important to show our youth today that someone just like them, that came from the same community, can eventually be in executive positions of leadership within organizations in our community. As our community changes, it's important to be involved and serve as change makers for our youth. I am very proud to be a homegrown South Bay kid attending local schools and being a champion for our youth. I strongly believe all youth no matter where they live deserve an equal opportunity to succeed.

I've continued to serve at the Boys & Girls Club for so many years because I've experienced the impact firsthand and understand that America needs club kids now more than ever. Our Alumni include mayors, business leaders, educators, just to name a few and are living proof of the impact our Club has on our community. I have a passion to continue serving out youth because I know that I would not be who I am today if I didn't have that community support. The Club provides a safe place for our youth to belong, be their authentic selves and participate in activities that might not be accessible elsewhere.

“

The Club has allowed my child to try new things and it has opened a different perspective for them.

JEFF: That's terrific. Tell me a little about the history of Boys and Girls Clubs.

STEPHANIE: The Boys & Girls Clubs of America originated in 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut by four women who saw that a group of boys had nowhere to go after school. They started by getting together and playing some games, some sports and just being together. Then the idea caught on and spread. Today there are over 5,000 clubs across the nation. That original house still exists today.

Then in 1906, fifty-three independent Boys Clubs came together in Boston to form a national organization. It was called the Federate Boys Club. The clubs have been serving youth within the communities since then. In 1990, the national organization added girls to the name as they officially allowed girls to join. The national headquarters is located in Atlanta, Georgia. On May of 2025, the 118th National Conference was held in San Diego, CA highlighting our youth mariachi and ballet folklórico on the main stage.

JEFF: How are the clubs organized?

STEPHANIE: In San Diego County, we have seven separate organizations with numerous club sites. We all have charters with the national organization, which provides support and resources. Each organization has its own individual CEO and serves a specific community area and

operates independently. It is important for everyone to know which community each organization serves to ensure their support is directly impacting the community of choice.

JEFF: When did it start in the South County?

STEPHANIE: The Imperial Beach Club started in 1966. In 2009, the Imperial Beach Club merged with the Chula Vista Club and officially became South County. Long-time residents might remember when our club was located in the Sears parking lot in the Chula Vista Mall.



Throughout the years the club has had several locations including next to the Chula Vista High school football field, Lauderbach Elementary School, and the latest off Oleander Ave. In 2020 we returned the Oleander site to the City and were going to move into a new building but the uncertainties of the pandemic make us pivot. We closed for three months trying to plan how to serve our youth with the new regulations. We were able to provide services to the community in person when they needed us most.

JEFF: Where is the club now?

STEPHANIE: Today we have a physical clubhouse in Imperial Beach and are in discussions to reopen a space in Chula Vista. We also have a partnership with the South Bay Union School District. We service their before and after school programs at eight of their schools. I do want to point out we have two separate

“

"I have two children in the Club. My 6th grader has learned to communicate better in a group setting and my 1st grader has learned to be more friendly and respectful of other people's choices."

models. A traditional Boys & Girls Club is when you have a brick-and-mortar building. Anyone can come to the club, there are no residency restrictions. If you are a family or a child and you need services, you can come to the Boys & Girls Club for support. Our membership fee is \$50 a year.

“

My child and I have a better dynamic because of the Boys & Girls Clubs of South County. She listens to the rules better while building connections with the Club Staff and her peers.

If you're active in the military, you are eligible for free membership through a Boys & Girls Clubs of America program called Mission Youth Outreach.

Many parents like our clubhouse model because they can drop off their child before work and then pick them up again after work. The difference with our before and after school programs is that we must work within the framework of the school district. Students can go to our program in the morning before school starts as early as 6:30 a.m., depending on the school hours and return to the program when school ends and stay until 6:00 p.m. For these school-based programs, there are no fees to the parents but they must meet the time requirements that might not always work with the family's time schedule.

Many of the families that come to us know that we are a trusted brand. They get to know our staff and learn that they can trust us enough to let us know if they are experiencing food insecurity, for example. They trust us when we suggest some resources that can help them. It's the same with medical resources. Collective impact is essential to truly be of assistance

to our community. We really try to build a network of organizations and resources and try to be out in the community. Even getting to know people like you, Jeff. What services can you provide or recommend? I mean, who knows, I might have a teen later on who wants to be a journalist, and I can say, hey, you know what, let me send you over to Jeff. He can help give you some guidance.

Speaking of teens, this is an area we are working to expand. Many teens are struggling today, so we want to develop programs that will be helpful to them. We are finding a particularly strong need for youths between the ages of 18-24. We have committed to BGCA's Future Ready strategic direction to serve more teens.

JEFF: Yes, I can imagine those years are an important transition time in their lives. These programs all sound wonderful. I am curious how your clubs are funded?

STEPHANIE: Our in-school programs receive money from the school district who receive Federal/State funds. For our Clubhouse programs, we rely on corporate and individual donations, and grants from foundations. For example, Panda Express is a partner of ours. Through their grants, we can open an education center or a computer lab. Cox Communications also provides funding to open a technology center. We count a lot on individual donors, sponsors, corporate foundations and fundraisers so that we don't have to charge parents more than \$50 per year. I am extremely proud that 87 cents of every single dollar that comes to the club goes directly into the programs in the South County.

JEFF: That's fantastic. Since we're on the topic of fundraising, tell me about your upcoming golf tournament.

STEPHANIE: Yes, our upcoming golf tournament is our biggest fundraiser of the year. Our board is very passionate about it. We are particularly excited about it this year because we are bringing it back to the San Diego Country Club in Chula Vista on Oct 27, 2025. We've had it there prior to COVID and are happy to



The deployment of my child's father is always hard, and Club Staff do an excellent job at understanding that challenge. Not only do they support my child but also me the parent. It's a true partnership.

be back. We are looking for sponsors and then foursome opportunities. It's a great opportunity for non-members to play this historic and beautiful course.

JEFF: Thank you Stephanie. We wish you the best of luck on your golf tournament and thank you for all that you do for our community! If readers want to contribute, they should go to your website or contact somebody on your team.

STEPHANIE: Yes, that would be great! Thank you, Jeff, for shining a light on our club by featuring us in your magazine. It is important that people like you give us an opportunity to really highlight what we are doing and how we can continue to grow in other communities.



Poetry Corner

Unity in Times of Uncertainty

by Jeff Bettger

If only the looking glass
could show the future
as well as the past,
humanity would face no fear,
no stress, no doubt, no uncertainty.

We long for calm and security,
but that has never been our fate.
A survival strategy we must employ.
Wisely, we choose to cling
together in our darkest hour.

Eons of evolution we thank,
intuitively gathering in community.
A sharing of heavy burdens,
a sharing of history with
those of similar identity.

When the winds of change blow,
we find comfort and strength
in harmony. The many become one.
A unity of purpose and resolve.
We were never meant to be alone.

Like migratory birds flying in formation,
each cutting the wind for the next,
in times of threat, we share our destiny.
Together we avoid the Devil's snare,
our life's journey shielded from despair.

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ABOUT THIS SECTION

In each issue, I will ask a resident born and raised in Chula Vista to share one of their fond memories of growing up in the South Bay, including the details of the event, the location and the year. For this first issue, I interviewed local residential real estate lender and head coach for the Eastlake High School freshman football team: **Ken Reed**.

JEFF: Ken thank you for your time. We have known each other for a long time and have done many real estate transactions together. Tell me one of your favorite memories from your youth.

KEN: The first thing that comes to mind is riding my bike. It was such an important part of my life. I rode it on a racetrack the neighborhood kids made in the canyons. I rode it to stores. I rode it to school. I remember being able to ride my bike all over town. I didn't have to worry about heavy traffic and there were plenty of places to ride. Now, as our population has grown, parents do need to worry more about their kids safety. Also, when we were young, we got a great workout peddling our bikes. Nowadays, kids are riding electric bikes!

A RACETRACK OF OUR OWN

My favorite memory was riding on dirt tracks in nearby canyons. Today they would call this type of riding BMX or Mountain Biking. We just called it fun! In those days, there were little canyons and empty fields everywhere. I was lucky enough to live over on Moss Street between 3rd and 4th Avenue. A block away was Lillian J. Rice Elementary school, which I went to at that time. Behind it was a big canyon we called Rice Canyon. It was a bike racetrack made by and maintained by local kids. I couldn't tell you who built it, but there were actually two racetracks, a lower one and an upper one. The lower one was a lot smaller and it was for beginners. It didn't have any real jumps. I remember it being surrounded by bamboo and trees. You would never

know it was there unless you actually rode into that place.

However, the upper track had big scary jumps. The one jump that was probably the most famous was one that we called the Bear Claw. You could only jump by riding up one side as fast as you could, get to the top, and then turn your bike around and then ride back down as fast as you could and launch yourself. The Bear Claw didn't have an actually landing spot. The kids wanted to see how far they could jump. As you might imagine, I witnessed a lot of accidents there. It was common to see kids in casts or with their faces scratched up from hitting the dirt.

Obviously, the track would develop some wear and tear over time. So the neighborhood kids would show up with buckets, go

get water out of the storm drain and start watering the track. Others would bring shovels to rebuild the ramps. It was pretty cool. Looking back, the kids were pretty inventive how well they maintained it. Socially, it was another way to meet kids from the surrounding neighborhoods. I was probably 10 or 11 years old at that time. We also built smaller ramps on the streets by our homes using plywood and cinder blocks. But Rice Canyon was special, it really was.

CRUISING AROUND TOWN

When we weren't jumping, you could find us riding our bikes up and down 3rd and 4th Avenues, hitting up the local Carl's Junior or Wendy's. I remember there was a pet store on 4th Avenue and Oxford that we would frequently go to because it had a lot of pets on display. Another favorite spot was the Schwinn Bike Shop. They had all the best bikes in the world, such as the GT Performers, the Diamondbacks, the stuff that none of us could afford. We would go in there and just drool looking at all these bikes that we all wanted so bad. We would wonder who the heck could buy these things because they were \$400 in those days, which was a big price tag.

We called our bikes "piecers." They were bikes that we purchased at a swap meet. I mean, they

were a name brand bike at one time, but now they were heavily used and didn't have all the original factory parts. It had parts from different bikes. So we called them piecers or Frankenstein bikes.

OUR SENSE OF FREEDOM

The bikes were our special thing, our getaway. They allowed us to feel pretty darn independent. In those days, we were known as the latchkey generation. We were out and about on our own quite a bit. The city of Chula Vista was a great place to grow up in those days because you didn't have to worry about too much. I mean, granted, there's always a bad apple here and there. Actually, I had my bike stolen, which is how my job as a paper boy for *The Star-News* ended. I miss that about Old Chula Vista, the bike culture. I miss seeing the kids delivering the newspaper, kids riding around town and bikes thrown all over the front lawn of someone's house that everyone's hanging out at. This would have been 1984-1986. I rode my bike to junior high. I went to Chula Vista Junior High, and every morning about five of us kids would ride our bikes together. We had so much fun. We were always doing wheelies, racing each other and doing what we called bunny hops over curbs. We'd get to school so sweaty, but we

didn't care. These days, movies like *The Sand Lot* and *The Goonies* are near and dear to my heart because they're so nostalgic. I remember my childhood being very much like that.

GRADUATION AND BEYOND

JEFF: Thank you Ken. After graduating from Chula Vista High School, Ken joined the Air Force and became a medic. After seeing a different world and serving his time, he returned to Chula Vista. Ken worked for Sharp Healthcare hospitals, until life took him to his career as a highly-respected residential real estate lender. His many clients brag about his knowledge and honesty. Because of the strong relationships he builds, he now serves the next generation of his previous clients. Ken and his family continue to live in Chula Vista. Giving back to his community has always been important to Ken. After years of coaching Eastlake Panthers football, Ken is now the head coach for the Eastlake High School Freshman football team.

Let's Chat!

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Tyto THE BARN OWL

by Catrice Chan

Hi there, friends! My name is Tyto the barn owl. I am about 15 years old. I have been living at the **Living Coast Discovery Center** since 2010. The Living Coast is a super fun place where some of the coolest animals live! It started way back in 1987, and now kids like you can learn all about animals and how to protect them. I have a great story to tell you, and some fun owl facts that might lift the feathers off your back. Because guess what? I am the coolest animal here at the Living Coast...just don't tell the bald eagle that I said that!

A little bit about me... when I was a baby, I lived high up in a tree. But one day, the tree was cut down, and I fell out of my nest! I was so scared! Thankfully, some amazing humans

rescued me and took care of me. I am now called non-releasable, which means I cannot return to the wild. So, I have been living with humans ever since!

I am not the only barn owl at the Living Coast! I have two amazing barn owl friends. Wachiwi is a female barn owl, and Wazowski is a male barn owl. Wachiwi came here in 2021; Wazowski in 2023. Wazowski's story is a bit sad, but it has a happy ending! He used to live with another female barn owl at a place called Skyhunters. Sadly, she passed away. Then he came to the Living Coast, where he met Wachiwi! Now, the two of them live together and are very happy! Oh, and did you know that Wazowski only has one eye? That is why he was named after

Mike Wazowski from the movie *Monsters, Inc.*! How cool is that!

Now let's talk about me and my owl superpowers! Not only can I see extremely well, but I can hear even better! Look at my face. It is shaped like a heart! Pretty cool, huh? That shape helps funnel sounds to my ears. Now check out my ears. I have asymmetrical ears, which means one ear is higher than the other. Strange, right? Well, that is what makes me one of the best animals at hearing!

Thanks to my fantastic hearing, I can hunt and find prey at night. Did you know that I can hunt in complete darkness? I even have something called silent flight - I can soar through the air without making a sound. That is because I have super light feathers



Photo of Wachiwi & Wazowski

and hollow bones. I can sneak up on prey without them hearing me! Oh, and fun fact - I only weigh 400 to 500 grams. That's as light as a loaf of bread! I may be small but I'm the master at hunting. Wanna race me to catch a mouse? I'd win every time!

Now let's talk about one of my favorite topics...food! I love to eat meal worms and small rodents like mice and rats. My all-time favorite food is mice! Have you ever tried mice? I know it sounds gross, but for barn owls like me, it's something we eat all the time! And I don't eat like you do. I swallow my food whole! Bones, skin, fur, everything! Then, I spit out the leftovers into something called a pellet. Yucky? Maybe. But that's just my way of eating!

Here's another fun fact! Most owls, like my friend the great-horned owl, make a deep "hoot hoot" sound. But guess what? I don't! I'm not like most owls. I hiss, screech, and click my beak. Other owls have their own

cool sounds too! My buddy the western screech owl clacks and makes high tooting sounds that sound like a bouncing ball! This is how we talk and scare away predators!

I had so much fun talking to you! Now you know why I'm the coolest animal at the Living Coast...or am I? That's up to you to decide! Come visit me and all my friends to see for yourself! You'll get to meet so many amazing animals like sharks, stingrays, turtles, eagles and, of course, owls! If you're lucky, you might even hear me screech. Oh, and if you're brave enough, you can even touch the sharks and stingrays! And don't forget to keep a lookout for one-eyed Wazowski perched in a tree. Be sure to give him a wave! I gotta fly now, but I'll be waiting! I can't wait to see you here at the Living Coast!



Learn more: <https://www.thelivingcoast.org/>



CAN YOU FIND ME?

Look closely—I'm hiding in four more places throughout this magazine.



South Bay Historical Society Guardians of Our Stories

Written by: Aurora-Marie Dolopo Zhivago, South Bay Historical Society

A Community's Memory Keepers

When you visit the South Bay Historical Society, you discover much more than dusty artifacts and sepia-tinted photographs. You meet neighbors who, like me, are piecing together the story of a region stretching from National City to the U.S.–Mexico border. Originally founded in 1958, the society was revitalized in 2013 by historian Dr. Steven Schoenherr to highlight the diverse communities of South Bay, host events and exhibits, and support residents' historical interests. Our mission—to preserve and promote the history of this region—guides everything we do. We hold regular meetings, publish newsletters, maintain a rich archive of photos and documents, and serve as a central resource for groups involved in historic preservation. We welcome everyone to browse our pages, share their stories, and join us at events. Website: <https://southbayhistoricalsociety.org/>

What We Do: Preserving Our Stories

As a nonprofit powered by volunteers, we offer many ways for community members to engage. We host meetings and events where members can delve into historical discussions and activities. Our newsletter shares regular stories, and our archives hold books, photos, articles, and artifacts for anyone interested in research. We also act as a connector, linking regional organizations and genealogists and promoting the exchange of information about historic sites, family photographs, exhibits, and oral histories. Beyond the archives, we encourage you to explore nature preserves, parks, and historic locations—from the bayfront to Proctor Valley—and reflect on how centuries of natural and human history have shaped today's vibrant South Bay.

Exhibits That Celebrate Us

Curating exhibits is one of the most exciting ways we share our history. A notable current educational exhibit at the Chula Vista Heritage Museum is "The Filipinos of South Bay", which traces the journey of Filipino immigrants from the Philippines to our region. This exhibit covers Philippine history and geography, chronicles waves of migration, and highlights contributions to the military, education, business, government, and civic life. Co-chair Anamaria Cabato explains that it celebrates community and honors

connections forged through dance, music, faith, fiestas, and pageants. It opened at the Civic Center Library in Chula Vista and remains on display through the end of 2025, with planning dating back to 2018 and resuming after pandemic disruptions. More info: <https://www.10news.com/news/local-news/south-bay-news/filipinos-of-south-bay-exhibit>



*Filipinos of South Bay Exhibit at the Chula Vista Heritage Museum.
Credit: ABC 10News San Diego*

We also mark local milestones. We celebrated, "The Chula Vista Fire Department Centennial," exhibited in the past at the South Library on Orange Avenue. Looking back on 100 years of service through interviews and archival photographs. More info: <https://www.chulavistaca.gov/departments/fire/fire-history>

Preserving Our Roads: The Historic U.S. Route 101 Project

In a time when modern freeways have replaced much of the old Pacific Coast highways, preserving the legacy of Historic U.S. Route 101 is more important than ever—and board member Jack Gechter is leading the way.

What Was U.S. 101?

Established in 1926, U.S. Route 101 followed the path of El Camino Real, once the primary north-south route through California. For decades, it carried travelers all the way down to San Diego. In 1964, Interstate 5 opened and U.S. 101 officially ended in Los Angeles.

The South Bay Project

On behalf of the South Bay Historical Society, Jack has been working to document and commemorate the local path of Historic U.S. 101. His research traces the historic California U.S. 101 route from the U.S.-Mexico border through San Ysidro, Chula Vista, and National City, identifying landmarks, businesses, and neighborhoods that once lined this vital corridor.

Route Signage Installation

Thanks to Jack's coordination with city officials, twenty (20) Historic California U.S. 101 signs have been installed in San Ysidro, Nestor, Chula Vista, and National City. These markers allow residents and visitors to see where the highway once ran and to reconnect with the region's transportation past.

Region-Wide Recognition

This project is part of a broader effort across San Diego County. Since 1998, Historic Route 101 has carried an official state designation, and signs are being installed up and down the coast to highlight its legacy.



Board member Jack Gechter beside the Historic Route 101 sign at 1655 Broadway (northbound), Chula Vista.

Honoring Our Heroes: Rebuilding the San Ysidro WWII Memorial

Preserving history isn't just about celebrating triumphs—it's also about remembering sacrifices. We partner with the Friends of San Ysidro WWII Memorial (FOSY) to restore a memorial that once stood outside the old San Ysidro Library. FOSY plans to re-establish a large memorial honoring 147 men and women from San Ysidro who served in World War II. The President of FOSY, Charlie Velazquez, inherited a photograph of the original plaque, which included the names of his brothers Alfredo and Adolfo. We invite you to "join the journey" and follow news about the memorial's reconstruction. We are finally in the process of rebuilding and returning the San Ysidro WWII Memorial to where it once stood. Together as a community, "We will succeed and remember our Heroes!"

More info:

<https://southbayhistoricalsociety.org/friends-of-san-ysidro-wwii-memorial/>



Photo courtesy of Jack Gechter

Meet the People Behind the Mission

Our volunteer board keeps this mission thriving.

Historian emeritus **Dr. Steven Schoenherr**, whose leadership was instrumental in revitalizing the Society, established a strong foundation for historical education and preservation. Building on that legacy, President **Aurora-Marie Dolopo Zhivago** supports the board and community by overseeing educational efforts, maintaining the research database, and responding to historical inquiries. Vice-President **Francia Castro** serves as Director of Historic Homes and Buildings. Francia is a professional real estate agent who draws on years of customer service experience. In 2023 she organized a successful historic home tour and tea party, giving participants a rare peek inside landmark houses that were coming up for sale. Her past clients have owned these historic gems, so she brings first-hand knowledge of their architecture and stories.

Our esteemed board members include:

Harry Orgovan – a native Chula Vista who grew up exploring the South Bay's outdoors. His love of swimming, fishing, hiking, and bird watching around San Diego Bay fuels his passion for preserving our stories. He currently works at the Living Coast Discovery Center in Chula Vista and remains an active environmental community member.

Jack Gechter – born in San Diego in 1949, Jack spent his early years in San Ysidro and later served in the USMCR 1969—1975 during the Vietnam War era. He earned an Associate Arts Degree – Engineering Surveying & Mapping and worked for the City of Chula Vista for 26 years (1979—2005). In 2005 Jack became a California Professional Land Surveyor (PLS 8051). He worked as a Professional Land Surveying Consultant (South Bay Land Surveying) 2005—2020.

Mitch Beauchamp – a lifelong National City resident and our treasurer, Mitch has watched the city change over 75 years. He and his wife Martha raised two daughters here, and his experience managing a Mexican railroad—he even obtained Mexican citizenship—deepens his appreciation for cross-border connections.

Sandra Scheller – brings extensive experience in arts and nonprofit work. After studying dance and communications at San Diego State University, she worked professionally as a performer and later for Cirque du Soleil until 2014. Her interest in

Holocaust education led her to write *Try to Remember Never Forget* and produce the RUTH Exhibit, which honors her mother's Holocaust survival story. With SBHS she has served as a former vice president and co-created the *Our Lives Our Future* YouTube series with fellow historian Harry Orgovan to spotlight South Bay leaders and survivors.

RUTH Exhibit:

<https://rememberustheholocaust.org/> | Our Lives

Our Future:

<https://www.youtube.com/@OurLivesOurFuture>

Kiko Rubio – brings an environmental perspective and holds associate degrees in Anthropology and Kumeyaay Studies. Kiko researches native plants, wetland habitats, and the eco-cultural history of the San Diego–Baja region. A certified UC California Naturalist, Kiko advocates for clean air and water and hopes to inspire appreciation for local ecology and indigenous communities.

Author's Note

Aurora-Marie Dolopo Zhivago is the author of the children's book *The Sakura* and holds a degree in Design from Arizona State University, FIDM. She taught Vector Graphics and 3D Design in the Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) program for the Chula Vista Elementary School District, and led after-school programs in Digital Media Arts for San Diego Unified and National City's ARTS: A Reason to Survive. She also taught Theatre Arts in the Sweetwater High School District. With more than 28 years of digital art experience, she continues to combine education, storytelling, and creativity to preserve and celebrate community history. ARTS:

<https://areasontosurvive.org/>



Aurora-Marie Dolopo Zhivago presenting at Comic-Con International. Photo credit: The Star-News

SOUTHWESTERN COLLEGE **CINDERELLA LEADS** CAMPUS NEWSPAPER TO NORTH AMERICAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Written by: Dr. Max Branscomb



ALEXA LIMA, BELOVED JEFITA OF THE SWC SUN, OVERCAME A SLOW START TO BECOME AMERICA'S MOST SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE JOURNALISM LEADER

Alexa Lima was radiant as she was interviewed for a television news segment. She had led her staff at the Southwestern College Sun student newspaper to the Columbia University Scholastic Press Association Gold Crown as the top collegiate newspaper in North America. The national journalism community was just beginning to learn about the soft-spoken but hard-charging Editor-in-Chief.

Her peers and journalism faculty already knew they had something special in la jefita, the Spanish honorific for their beloved leader.

It is an ink-stained Chula Vista Cinderella story, minus the evil stepmother. Lima earned an astonishing six national writing championships, the Society of Professional Journalists Bradley Fikes Scholarship, Southwestern College Student of Distinction Award and SWC Equity Champion medal. Publications she has led have earned five collegiate Pulitzer Prizes. The Sun and El Sol Magazine have been named National Champions by virtually every collegiate media organization in the United States.

Just three years ago Lima

was a two-time college dropout with no idea which direction to take her life. She tried nursing, but discovered she did not like blood, guts and constipating anatomy classes. A professor bluntly told Lima that her “soul was not in it.” She loved her next major, anthropology, but got knocked off course by the COVID pandemic and the impersonal online classes she was forced to take.

“I was kind of lost for a while,” she said. “I was discouraged by my first college experiences. I started to wonder if I was college material.”

That changed rapidly once Lima set foot in the newsroom of The Sun. She had been recruited out of a beginning journalism class by the publication’s faculty advisor.

“I walked into the building and could not believe all the awards on the walls,” she said. “I had no idea the room would be like that. It was a little intimidating but also inspiring. I wondered if maybe I could do work that could win something like that.”

The Sun had a nice vibe, she said, and her classmates were kind and

supportive.

“It immediately felt like home,” she said. “That was something I needed. Later, when I was in charge, I worked very hard to make the newsroom feel that way for the next staff members.”

Lima is a *transfronteriza*, a young citizen of the multinational borderlands who was born in the U.S. but feels at home on either side of *la linea*. She attended elementary school in Tijuana, then Rancho del Rey Middle School and Otay Ranch High School. Her English-Spanish fluency and biculturalism are great gifts that she has put to use as a journalist.

“I like that Southwestern College and The Sun value my ability to speak Spanish and my roots in two countries,” she said. “Most of our staff is bilingual or trilingual, which gives us power. We can talk to people and do stories other news organizations cannot do. It is such an advantage to have staff that speaks Tagalog, Spanish and other languages.”

When she arrived in Fall 2023 The Sun was run by a group of young women the advisor called the “Super

Latinas.”

“It was so cool to see those really smart young Latinas running a national-caliber newspaper and magazine,” she said. “One of them (Nicolette Luna) was only 15 years old when she started. It was very inspiring and I decided I wanted to be a Super Latina someday.”

Cinderella got her wish.

Prior to her second semester Lima was promoted to Arts Editor. She had been a competitive dancer as a child and loved the arts, though at first she wrote for the Sports section.

“My first interview was with Susan Reasons, the tennis coach,” she said. “Coach Reasons was very nice and I enjoyed interviewing the players.”

Lima said she learned an immediate lesson.

“Covering tennis late in the afternoon in the early spring taught me to always take a jacket, two pens, two pencils and two reporter’s notebooks,” she said. “I started the day feeling warm and nearly froze by the end of the matches.”

Lima was an outstanding Arts Editor, but did not hold the job for long. When the

Editor-in-Chief had to step down due to a family tragedy, Lima was everyone’s choice to take over. It was a sad and difficult time for the mostly teenage staff who were grieving along with their former EIC and friend.

“When I stepped in it was tough,” she said. “(My predecessor) was a really good EIC and a great writer.



She is a real talent. I had to be sensitive to how everyone was feeling but also needed to get everyone back to work doing their jobs.”

Lima said she steeled herself to the responsibility of directing people she considered friends.

“I worried about that,” she said. “I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to separate the job from friendships. It can be tough to suddenly become the leader of a group of friends. You still have to hold everyone accountable.”

Yanelli Robles, the Photo Editor under Lima, said her mentor handled the transition “with the perfect blend of professionalism and grace.”

“Alexa already had so much respect,” Robles said. “It was a fluid transition. Her experience gave us confidence that she could keep us on track. She created a comfortable

space for us while also supporting (the former EIC). She was so positive and she had great news judgment. She always knew what stories to pick and what we should be working on. She made sure we worked hard and did everything for the right reasons.”

Lima said her staff never disappointed her.

“Sometimes it felt like (I was driving) an F1 racecar because the staff was smooth and powerful,” she said. “I always wanted them to know I supported their good ideas and appreciated their effort.”

When Lima selected the Editorial Board in Fall 2024 she said there were traits she was looking for.

“I wanted editors who respected other people, who worked well with others and I could talk to,”

she said. “Those are characteristics that made us successful last year. Those are the same characteristics that will make our editors successful in their futures. My job was to support my talented team so it could be successful. That makes the organization successful.”

Four projects stood out for her during her tenure as the leader of The Sun, said Lima.

“I absolutely love the ‘Chicanas of Chicano Park’ photo spread in the current issue,” she said. “It is beautiful and empowering and super creative. It is talented students letting their talents shine.”

Another was a bad review written about a local theater production by a smart but withdrawn student.

“When I read the review of (the play) and saw that it was a thoughtfully written bad review I was so impressed,” she said. “We knew Anahy (Gutierrez) was very intellectual, but I did not know at the time that she had the courage to write something like that. It ended up winning every national award for theater criticism. I think that story showed Anahy how talented she is and it really gave her a new level of confidence. She did lots of great work after that.

One unforgettable project, Lima said, was entirely unplanned. News Editor Dira Wong was covering a town hall meeting about botched enrollment management when she did what journalists are trained not to do – stand up and give an impassioned speech condemning the college administration for cancelling intercessions and slimming the spring schedule.

“I figured (the advisor) would have a heart attack when (he) watched the video, but we made it a learning experience,” Lima said. “We talked to the staff about not making a habit of doing that, but we also realized Dira’s (impromptu) speech was brilliant and needed to be shared.”

The Sun published Wong’s remarks as a column that acknowledged the breach of protocol, but also the power of what she said.

“It was an amazing truth-to-power moment,” Lima said. “That took guts to stand up and say what she did to a roomful of campus leaders.”

Wong’s column won the top award from the Society of Professional Journalists for Opinion Writing. More important, the college reestablished some of the winter intersession classes and summer school.

Lima said the Editorial

Board’s unsigned editorial in the current issue of The Sun is another of her favorite team projects.

“Our Editorial Board basically called out governing board members for bad behavior toward each other and for cutting two elected officials out of decision making,” she said. “Three board members were really upset with us at first, then two let us know later that they are going to try to do better to get along and raise the performance level of the board. I hope they do, for the sake of the school. I hope all five board members will take a moment and reflect. It’s not necessary to love everyone you work with, but you have to at least be respectful and put the good of the organization ahead of your own personal issues with other people.”

Members of The Sun also worked through disagreements and tense moments, Lima said.

“That was the hardest part of being the leader,” she said. “Sometimes you have to make tough decisions that can make you unpopular or disliked. But when you lead you have to put the team above your own fear of losing friends.”

Her staff said that never happened and that Lima diffused tense situations with a firm grace.

"Alexa has a beautiful way of communicating with people," said Nicolette Luna, a dual-enrolled BVHS-SWC student and three-time Editor-in-Chief of El Sol Magazine who now attends UC Berkeley. "She is a great leader with so much knowledge she was always happy to share. She uplifted, supported and encouraged the entire staff. She was the backbone of our program."

Luna said she took many lessons she learned from Lima with her to Berkeley.

"Alexa taught me things that have enhanced my experience (at Berkeley)," she said. "I love Alexa. I am so happy she will be in Northern California with me. I look forward to continuing to talk with her and visit her at Chico."

Lima confessed that she had four personal favorite projects. She said it was rewarding to write about Southwestern's internationally-renowned Mariachi, conduct a TV interview with the college president and investigate the high level of turnover among college administrators. Her favorite of all was an epic-length profile of the first Chicana rock star, National City's Rosie Mendez Hamlin, who led the band Rosie and the Originals and wrote the anthem "Angel Baby."

Lima's poetic article was republished by The Times of San Diego, which led to an invitation by KPBS to present the story for radio and television.

"It was such a thrill to voice Rosie's story on KPBS radio and TV," Lima said. "It was really an honor because Rosie was a great Latina who came from humble roots in National City. She is from our college district and community."

In August Lima will transfer to CSU Chico to study journalism and develop her skills as a broadcaster. She said she would love the chance to lead Chico's elite university newspaper, The Orion. At least three former Southwestern College journalism students have done just that.

"If given the opportunity I would love to apply to be EIC of The Orion," she said. "I can't wait to go to Chico so I can continue to get better as a print and broadcast journalist. It's a great school and I am going to try to learn everything I can while I'm there."

Journalists have an awesome responsibility, Lima said,

because "they write the first draft of history."

"I would like to be a journalist who tells stories of underrepresented people and people from our border community who may not be comfortable speaking in English," she said. "Southwestern's journalism program is important because it is so diverse. America does not have enough journalists from minority communities. Our nation needs journalists like those coming out of Southwestern College. We are training students to be journalists who will bring special talents and knowledge to the profession."

Traveling to national college news media conventions drove home that point.

"It was such a shock for me, Nikki (Luna), Camila



(Gonzalez) and Emily (Ingco) to be the only Latinas, Native American and Filipina in an auditorium full of editors from across America. It reminded us how special Southwestern College is and how unique we are as women of color who lead news organizations.”

Lima said The Sun is in good hands next semester.

“Yanelli is going to do a great job,” she said. “She will have Dira (Wong) and Ines (Cervantes) and other talented editors. Maybe (the advisor) will have to bring back the Super Latinas!”

Young leaders and Latinas insist Lima is a Super Latina. She met with a hand-picked group of talented young leaders for a leadership seminar called “Teen Titans and

Latinas Maravillosas” and was everyone’s favorite source of wisdom. She gave all the young women her personal cell phone number and invited them to call if they wanted to talk in the year ahead.

“There were people who took interest in me and were mentors,” she said. “I want to be able to do that for other young women and young journalism leaders.”

Southwestern College will always hold a special place in her heart, Lima said.

“Southwestern gave me a chance – a few chances, actually,” she said. “I learned so much and grew so much. It’s a magical place if you open your heart to all the possibilities.”





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