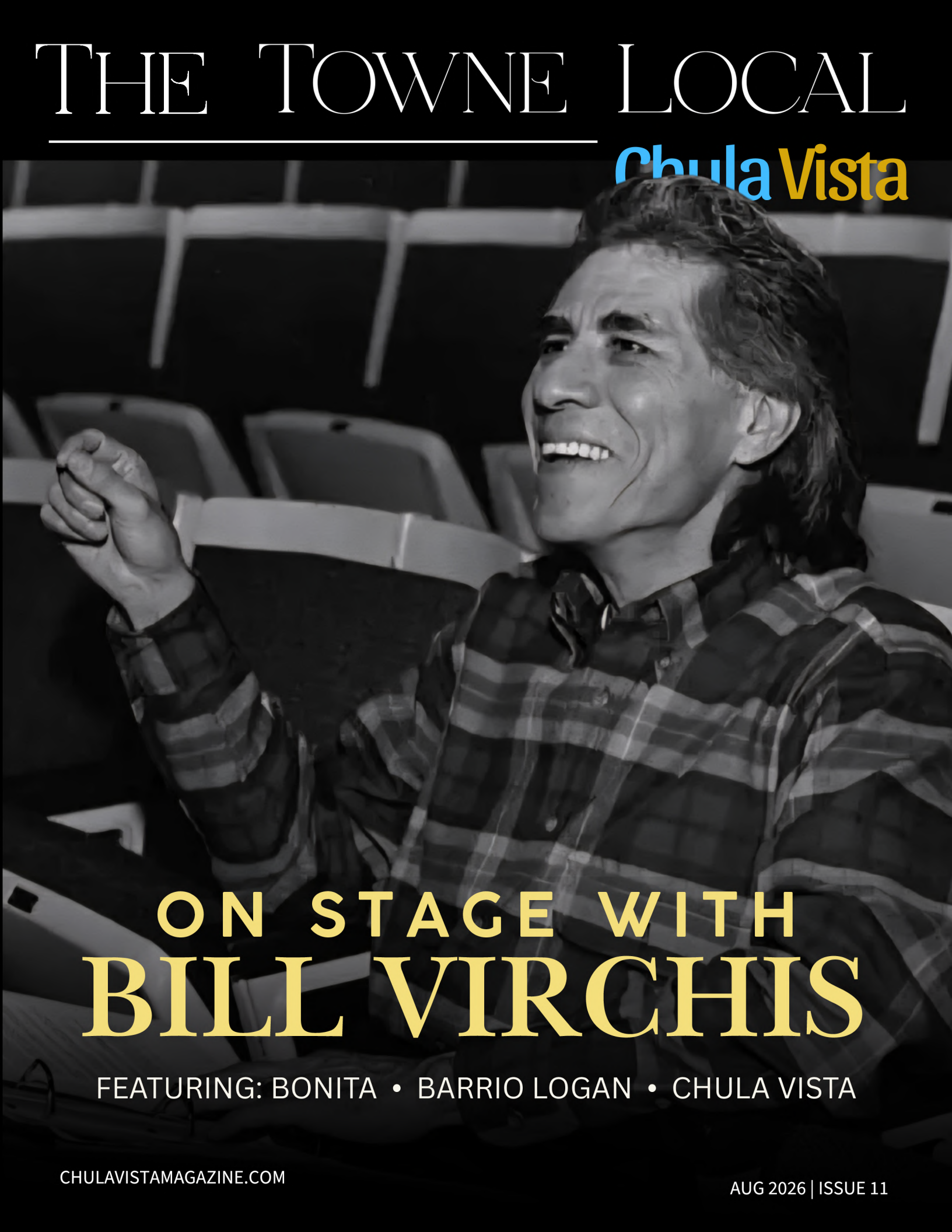


THE TOWNE LOCAL

Chula Vista



ON STAGE WITH BILL VIRCHIS

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Photo courtesy of Claudia Rodriguez-Biezunski of Sew Loka
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CHULA VISTA

HELPING OTHERS



JEFF BETTGER
PUBLISHING DIRECTOR

When the coach of the Girls' Tennis Team at Mar Vista High School mentioned that several girls who wanted to join the team were having trouble affording a tennis racket, I put out the word to my tennis and pickleball friends. Jackie Metcalf spread the word to her friend Debbie McFarland, a tennis aficionado. Debbie immediately offered to donate eight new rackets. She also included a hand-written note of encouragement on each racket! Thank you Debbie for your support! Go Mar Vista Tennis Team!!!



+++++

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



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100% Local ABOUT OUR TEAM



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PRESENTS

Musica Vitale



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The Friends of the Bonita-Sunnyside Library, in partnership with the San Diego County Library Bonita-Sunnyside Branch is proud to announce the launch of the ****Friends of the Bonita-Sunnyside Library Concert Series****

"We are thrilled to expand our cultural offerings and bring live, high-caliber music directly to our South Bay neighbors," said Frank Borik, Artistic Director. "This series highlights the remarkable talent within our region while creating an accessible, welcoming space for the community to connect."

Concerts will take place at 2:00 PM on the first Saturday of each month in the community room at the Bonita-Sunnyside Library, located at 4375 Bonita Rd, Bonita CA 91902. Admission is free to the public.



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91902
619-475-4642**





BONITAFEST 54

SHAPING UP AS THE PARTY OF THE YEAR!

Bonitafest Mascot Predicts an All-Time Parade, Arts Festival and Melodrama

by Dr. Max Branscomb

Bonitafest is the Sweetwater Valley's biggest party and its biggest star promises a foot stompin' good time. Silver the Wonder Pony has announced the dates for this year's Bonitafest events:

— Coming Soon —

- **Bonitafest Twilight Trail Parade. Saturday, September 12, 6 p.m.** Sunnyside Saddle Club Arena, Rohr Park, 4548 Sweetwater Road.
- **Bonitafest Performing Arts Festival, Saturday, September 12, 6:30 p.m. – 9 p.m.** Bonita Museum and Cultural Center, 4355 Bonita Road.
- **49th Annual Bonitafest Melodrama "Bonita Vista by Two," September 23-26, 7:30 p.m.** Sweetwater Community Church Theater, 5305 Sweetwater Road.

The Towne Local Chula Vista: Thank you for meeting with us, Silver. We know you've been saddled with a lot of appearances.

Silver the Wonder Pony: No problemo. Always happy to chat with the Towne Local.

TTLCV: Silver, you are coming back for your 24th year as the official mascot of the Bonitafest. What keeps you going?

SILVER: Good health. Good nutrition from the Sunnyside Stock Farm, and carrots from Murrieta's. Ju jitsu and yoga over at Bonnie Brae Center. Lots of veggie juice from those mom and pop joints on Bonita Road. Get in my laps around the Chula Muni Golf Course. Stay on top of my game so I can hang on to the best gig in the biz.

TTLCV: We heard you turned down mascot offers from the World Cup and Super Bowl.

SILVER: Great invites from top organizations. Honored they thought of me, but there's no leaving Bonitafest. Get to work with a cool committee powered by super smart youngsters. Our General Chairwoman **Nicolette Luna** is just 20. She's in her third year at UC Berkeley but flies down here for planning meetings and the big event.

TTLCV: You've been spending Sundays at Chantal Branscomb's dance classes. What's up with that?

SILVER: Since it's the 54th Bonitafest we're going with a disco theme inspired by Studio 54. Committee member **Trevor Braaten** came up with the idea. Our gifted illustrator **Carla Labto** had me into her studio for a session and came up with the disco-Travolta version of me busting a move. I've always enjoyed hoofing it.

TTLCV: Carla made you look great. So what's the playlist for this year's Bonitafest Parade?

SILVER: Our VIPs are awesome. Our jammin' Grand Marshal is **Kat Shaw**, the amazing principal of Howard Gardner Community School. She's transformed

WHERE WE BEGAN: BONITA

HGCS and helped turn students into scholars, creative thinkers and community leaders. **Sinay** is a fifth grader on the Bonitafest Planning Committee who comes to every meeting with her teacher, **Julie Schneider**. Kat inspires students with encouragement and confidence.

TTLCV: She sounds remarkable.

SILVER: She is, I'm tellin' ya. So are the two newspaper publishers we're honoring. Historian **Susan Heavilin** runs "Sunnyside Common Sense" and Humanitarian **Rose Davis** is the fearless leader of "Indian Voices." Both ladies work tirelessly to fill news holes left by the region's larger media outlets.

TTLCV: We noticed that former TTLCV cover model **Micheal Leaf** is being honored.

SILVER: Yeah, he's a brilliant artist. He is the talent behind the blue wrap of the Bonita Museum and Cultural Center, not to mention two lovely public art pieces on the museum's grounds. Michael and his charming wife Stephanie will be the Bonitafest Host and Hostess.

TTLCV: Right on. And **Isabel Caballero**, the former Miss Bonita is being honored?

SILVER: The one and only. She is currently Miss of America. Smart lady who was president of the Robotics Club and a star in Sound Unlimited at BVHS. Now she works and volunteers as a social researcher studying harm reduction.

TTLCV: Is that **Dolly Engen's** name I see on the list?

SILVER: Yeah, everyone's favorite community volunteer is this year's Bonitafest Pioneer. Dolly is everywhere all at once doing everything. She supports equestrians, the performing arts, community events... Don't know where she gets the energy. Dolly is like the dark matter that binds the universe.

TTLCV: Whoa there, pony! Getting all astrophysical on us!

SILVER: Sorry, I've been reading some stuff by Steven Hawking because I was inspired by one of our Bonitafest Youth Ambassadors. We've corralled a great team. **Alfonso Julian Camacho**—like Steven Hawking—uses technology to help

him to communicate with others. He is a gifted Southwestern College student who is a national spokesperson for people on the autism spectrum. As a member of the nonprofit The Autism Scene, he was recently at Nickelodeon championing the inclusion of more characters with disabilities in entertainment programming. **Dalia Candelario** is one of the region's most gifted performing artists. She won Best Performer medals six times this year in show choir competitions with Sound Unlimited and Music Machine, starred in the last two Sweetwater Summer Musical productions "Hadestown" and "Mama Mia," and this year's Bonitafest Melodrama "Bonita Vista by Two." She is dazzling! **Alec Zelaya** is a multitalented performing artist and community leader. He played several characters in last year's musical "Here Comes The Sun" and the KNSJ Radio production of "La Pastorela." **Nova Elago-Edwards** is a cheerleader at BVHS and vice president of the Black Student Union. She is a leader in the BVHS Impact Club that promotes community-minded activities and student service.

TTLCV: Impressive! Can't wait to meet them.

SILVER: They'll spearhead the Bonitafest Twilight Trail Parade on September 12.

TTLCV: I see your manager over there tapping his watch. Thanks so much for this Bonitafest roundup!

SILVER: Always happy to hang with you, especially when I can dish about Bonitafest. See you on the trail!



*First Bonitafest parade Oct. 19, 1973.
Photo courtesy of the Bonita Museum*



Answering the Fire Alarm

The Bonita-Sunnyside Fire Department just reached a milestone. After 30 years of firefighting service, Chief Mike Sims recently answered the bell for the last time. A tear-filled ceremony paid tribute to the man everybody has called Chief.

Jeff Bettger: Newly retired Chief Sims, where are you from originally?

Chief Sims: I grew up in the Santa Ana area and then we moved to Encinitas when I was young. I pretty much spent my whole formative years in Encinitas growing up in that coastal community. Then after high school, I went to Miramar College to start my fire service education there.

Jeff: Why firefighting?

Chief Sims: When I was 16, I was driving with a buddy of mine and we saw a guy shoot a woman in the middle of the street and then shoot himself. So, we stopped and kicked the gun away from him because they were both still alive. We hollered to the neighbors to call 911, and we just sat on the curb with the gun right there at our feet in the gutter, waiting for police and fire to arrive. We felt pretty helpless not knowing what to do. I didn't like that feeling. When the fire department arrived, they all went right to work. They knew exactly what their job was. I thought that was cool. I remember thinking I'd like to know what to do in emergency. And so, I thought maybe I'll be a firefighter.

Jeff: Wow, what a great story! How did you end up working in Bonita?

Chief Sims: I had been testing all over the state and even out of the state. There would be thousands of candidates applying to the larger departments. The whole idea of working for a small department appealed to me more. And I really liked the Bonita department and was hired on my second round of testing. Before that, I worked for General Dynamics Conair Fire Department for 5 ½ years. It was an industrial fire brigade, and we responded to emergencies in the facility only, such as fires, people getting hurt, and hazardous materials.

Jeff: Let's talk about Bonita. What is the size of the department?

Chief Sims: We have one engine. So there's three shifts of four, for a total of 12, plus the fire chief.

Jeff: What are some of the specific job descriptions?

Chief Sims: We have the chief who runs the department. Then below the chief, we have the three captains, one for each shift, and they're responsible for their crew on the fire engine, which consists of an engineer, the driver, and two firefighter paramedics.

Jeff: At this time, is it pretty much required that firefighters are also paramedics?

Chief Sims: For us, yes. Other agencies around the region are starting to hire EMT's because the paramedic pool is pretty thin nowadays.

Jeff: Beside fighting fires, what kind of emergencies do you assist?

Chief Sims: A good 70+ percent of our call volume is medical aid. We always respond with an ambulance

that has a paramedic and an EMT on it because any medical aid could easily need a four-or-five-person team to do compressions on a cardiac call or control bleeding or perhaps there are multiple patients. We come prepared with a fire engine and an ambulance on every medical aid.

Jeff: My next question is regarding the coordination with surrounding fire departments.

Chief Sims: We use a concept called boundary drop. There are no hard boundaries. We routinely and by design respond across boundaries every day. For example, if our engine is on a call, we may need another nearby agency to come cover for us on a second emergency, and vice versa. If San Diego City Engine 32 is busy, we run across the 54 and cover their calls.

Jeff: What about the really big fires like we recently had in the mountains east of Otay Lakes?

Chief Sims: In those cases, CAL FIRE comes in for campaign fires like that, where it's going to be over multiple days. We'll stand up an incident command team and there's several of those at several levels. Those are typically made up of personnel from all different agencies, such as an expert in logistics, an expert in operations, an expert in admin procedures. We support those teams until the fire is out.

Jeff: How many calls do you typically get?

Chief Sims: We get about 2,000 a year, and that translates to about five per shift, but there are times we get up to 12 per shift. We are always ready for anything. If there's a significant weather event that we're expecting, we will call in a second crew and staff up our reserve engine. That way, we have double the power, you know, for anything that might happen.

Jeff: You have 2 engines?

Chief Sims: Yeah, we have a front line and a reserve engine. A frontline engine is in service for 10 years and then we put it in reserve status for another 10, so the whole span of an engine is 20 years. We have a new engine on order, and it should be here and in service hopefully in a year and a half. We ordered it two years ago. It takes almost four years to get.

Jeff: What's unique about being in Bonita as opposed to being in downtown San Diego?

Chief Sims: The volume of calls is probably a little less

in Bonita than downtown, where it's a denser populated area. And for sure, the types of calls can differ. We can get an animal rescue call, such as a horse trapped in a ditch or somebody bucked off a horse. Working specifically in Bonita for the past 31 years, the community support has been amazing. They've been behind the department and supported us through every challenge. Bonita is close community, and it seems like the fire department is sort of the hub.

Jeff: I get the feeling a lot of people who live in Bonita know you guys, right?

Chief Sims: Yeah, I think you're exactly right. We've intentionally tried to foster a close relationship with the community. We try to go above and beyond, whether it is following up or saying hello to people at the grocery store.

Jeff: What kind of training do you do as a department?

Chief Sims: We are constantly training. There are 5 zones in the county. We're part of the Central Zone and we border on Metro Zone, which includes San Diego, National City, and Chula Vista. We train with them regularly as well. This is important because it fosters relationships between the personnel, so you don't show up on an emergency scene and you're like, oh, who's that guy? All our team members know all the other teams. So when they show up, it's like, hey, Steve, go ahead and secure utilities and we're going to get on the roof and handle this. Everybody's on the same page. That's a huge benefit of training together in person and doing hands-on stuff. That's when we can work out any bugs regarding compatibility of different types of equipment, etc.

Jeff: What would you say have been the major changes in firefighting in the last 30 years?

Chief Sims: The basic job is the same. Point the hose



Chief Sims and team ready to respond to fire and medical emergencies.



"I really enjoyed serving the community of Bonita."

and get the wet stuff on the red stuff. But what has changed is the fact that there's tons of data now available on what works and what doesn't work. There's a handful of agencies like Underwriter's Laboratories and NIST that do very technical scientific tests. We've embraced that in the last 10 years. We've tweaked our game to make us more efficient, safer, and overall better at our craft.

Jeff: What's the most common injury to a firefighter? I know it's a dangerous job.

Chief Sims: Yeah, a lot of lower back injuries because there's a lot of awkward lifting, for example, lifting patients. Often you just don't have a choice. You've just got to do it. You can try to lift properly with your legs, but sometimes you're just in a funky position and it puts a strain on your back. We also see knee injuries from stepping off of those fire engines. They're high off the ground. If you step off at night on uneven ground, you can twist a knee or an ankle.

Over the past 5-10 years, we are also starting to recognize mental injuries, PTSD type stuff. Our crews see so much sad stuff, which causes loss of sleep and the overall stress of the job. Everything starts to wear on you mentally. And I don't think we knew that was happening in the past. You know, when I was a young firefighter, it was just suck it up and deal with it. Some folks would deal with it with alcohol consumption and unhealthy habits. Other folks would deal with it better, you know, through exercise and better diet and everything. So that has come to the forefront as an issue to be aware of. Now we talk about proper diet and exercise and healthy relationships and limited alcohol consumption.

Jeff: What would you say has been the most dangerous

fire situation you've been in during your career?

Chief Sims: For structure fires, I've never really felt like I was in a tough position or in danger. I have felt uncomfortable on big vegetation fires where maybe the wind shifts unexpectedly or it kind of comes in harder than we expected. I think it was the Harris fire where we were sitting on a house protecting it because the fire was running towards it uphill, which accelerates the speed of the fire and the intensity. The fire bumped the edge of the property a lot harder than I expected so we took cover on the backside of the house and let the fury of it subside a little bit. Then we came back around and knocked down any remaining hotspots.

Jeff: I don't think a typical person can really imagine what it's like. You're fighting a big brush fire, you've got your uniform on, all your equipment. You've been out there for hours and hours. You're physically working hard, and it's just hot as heck.

Chief Sims: I think a lot of times we're just running on adrenaline. It's in the summer when you have those big fires, so it's already hot in addition to the heat of the flames. But with the adrenaline, you don't even notice the heat, the fatigue, and the lack of sleep. And it sounds strange to say, but it is exciting. That's what we live for. That's what we train for. We want to get out there and save people and property. It's an exciting career and it's fun when you slay the dragon, as we say.

Jeff: What will you miss the most now that you're retired?

Chief Sims: I will really miss the people. I've been Fire Chief for eight years, so I've done everything from fighting the fires to office work. But the great people in the department and in the community have been constant the whole time. So that's going to be the adjustment, you know, not having that side of things, but I'll find it in other venues outside of firefighting.

Jeff: Thank you so much, Chief, for your time today and for your years of service. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

Chief Sims: Just to highlight the fact that I really enjoyed serving the community of Bonita. It's a unique community and I feel really blessed to have been picked up here and to work a whole career here. It was a perfect fit for me and hopefully I did it justice and served the community well. I enjoyed every minute of it.



THEATER SAVED MY LIFE

By Gianna Rodriguez

Within two minutes of sitting down with **Mr. Bill Virchis**, he made the claim that theater saved his life. A statement that would ordinarily elicit an explanation, one even he seemed on the precipice of giving. And yet, at every instance the conversation appeared to be bordering that explanation, all he could do was steer it towards another person he owed his life to.

For nearly seven decades, William "Bill" Virchis has been an actor, director, educator, producer, and mentor. He has worked with professional theater companies, taught generations of students, and helped build arts programs throughout the South Bay. He co-founded Teatro Máscara Mágica, which has spent four decades creating multicultural theater in the region. But beneath it all, one belief ties everything together. "Theater saved my life."

ACT I. TURNING THE LIGHTS ON

To Bill, theater has never been

merely entertainment. It is discipline. It is communication. It is culture. It is a way of understanding other people, a behavioral science of sorts. It is a place where a person can learn how to become someone they did not yet know they could be. And perhaps most importantly, it is a place where people can see themselves. It gave an energetic, but at times misunderstood, firecracker of a boy an outlet. His story began to unfurl at an early age, with a family of artists of every kind, and a childhood right here in our very own Chula Vista.

In 1951, the Virchis family moved from Mexico City to the US because of his father's work owning an airline. Crossing the San Ysidro border, they planned to make a home in Los Angeles. Driving up the 5, they saw a billboard welcoming them to "Chula Vista, Population 55,000", where a cheery cartoon of a Sombrero convinced them to pass through.



*Bill Virchis Wrestling Champion
Chula Vista High School*

Young Bill's devotedly Catholic mother asked around for the nearest church, St. Rose of Lima, which happened to have a house for sale down the street. They took it as a sign, purchased it, and never looked back.

Virchis calls himself the "uninhibited one" of his family—not necessarily the straight-A student his brother and sister were, but he found his community somewhere beyond the classroom. For a young boy who did not find his place among the academics around him, theater was what gave a place for all of his bubbling energy to go, and what gave him an environment where he could finally understand himself. When he was nine, his father took him to audition at the Old Globe. Bill didn't even know English; his mother knew Shakespeare in Spanish, so he learned his entire audition phonetically. He got the part. Craig Noel, the Globe's longtime artistic director, became one of the most important mentors of his life.

Virchis entered professional theater before his age had even reached the double digits, and has not left it since. Decades later, he would still talk about Noel, not as a name on his résumé, but as someone who had given him a place to begin.

At Chula Vista High School, Bill found himself in multiple roles: student, actor, and athlete. Wrestling became one of the defining threads of his life. "Wrestling and theater were the metaphor of my life," Virchis told me. The two disciplines might seem worlds apart, his "iconic yin and yang" as he puts it. But they were of equal importance to him. Both demanded immense preparation, discipline, trust, and the ability to perform under pressure. They required the willingness to work as part of something larger than yourself. There is something to be said about wrestling, more so than for other sports, even. It requires a different kind of intensity, Bill notes, one that is unsustainable unless paired with passion of the unimaginable kind. Sweat is nothing new, sure, but constantly starving yourself to make weight? Not even having teammates to hide behind on your off days? Wrestling became yet another place where he could transform all of his spiritedness into something purposeful. That fervent discipline and absolute concentration were woven into Bill's character very early on.

As an actor, Virchis had to embody a different kind of intensity. The kind it takes to

absolutely tear a character inside out, recognize them only by their deepest fears and closely guarded contradictions, and know the rawness that lies underneath the performance they give the world. Then, somehow, he had to translate their essence into his own body, and give them life again and again under the stage lights. Needless to say, it takes a lot out of you to be good at one of those disciplines. It takes greatness to have mastered both. And both taught him a thing or two about people.

Those lessons followed him to Southwestern College. But Bill's path through education was not a straight line. Virchis first arrived at the community college as a student in 1963. One of his favorite stories takes place when construction on the then new 400-seat theater was being completed. Bill walked onto the construction site, found the stage, and began doing Shakespeare. He had

found an empty stage and, apparently, couldn't resist using it. Hearing the performance, a janitor ran in and screamed. "What the hell are you doing? Get out of here." This anecdote, however humorous, captures more than his defiant spirit. It encapsulates his willingness to walk towards any place he sees possibility, even when someone tells him he doesn't belong there yet. And once he gets there, he tends to leave the door open behind him.

ACT II. SETTING THE STAGE

Bill's education continued at San Diego State University, where he earned a Bachelors and Masters degree in Drama. During this time, Virchis was also coaching wrestling at his alma mater, Chula Vista High School. When his high school theater teacher suffered a heart attack, Bill was asked to return to the school as a replacement. What was supposed to be

1973 SWC production of *The Timid Dragon*



a temporary position ended up earning him the Teacher of the Year Award and set the tone for all his teaching roles to come. The stage had become the classroom, and Bill knew exactly how to run that one smoothly.

Eventually, he would return to Southwestern College. Not as the student who had once wandered onto its unfinished stage, but as the teacher who had spent decades building stages for others and teaching generations of theater students. He spent countless years at Southwestern College, where he directed productions, mentored young artists and helped establish a theatrical tradition that would outlast individual productions and generations of students.

After that, Virchis built a stage for a community. In 1989, Virchis and Jorge Huerta co-founded Teatro Máscara Mágica, creating a multicultural theater company whose mission included showcasing diverse cultures and providing professional opportunities for underrepresented communities. The company also sought to make live theater accessible by subsidizing ticket prices for families and people with fewer financial resources. Productions including *La Pastorela*, *Let the Eagle Fly* and *I Am Celso* helped establish the company as part of the region's cultural landscape. *La Pastorela* was recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts and human-rights organizations, and Teatro Máscara Mágica received the 2004 San Diego County Multicultural Heritage Award for its leadership in multicultural theater. *La Pastorela* grew into one

of the company's defining productions, eventually reaching four generations of actors and audiences.

Its stories drew from Mexican culture while creating a place for the region's increasingly diverse communities to see themselves onstage, the first time ever, for



Bill with legendary director Luis Valdez

many. This was an idea that mattered deeply to Virchis. His mother was a poet in Mexico, and his grandfather was a sculptor who worked in Mexican film. Art and culture were part of his family history—but with Teatro

Máscara Mágica, he could give that history a stage of its own. Through it, he inspired people who looked just like him to see a career in the arts for themselves. Virchis's relationship with art, however, began long before he started building stages for other people. He grew up in a family of artists, surrounded not only by creative work but by parents who encouraged him to pursue it on his own terms. He described that influence less as being pushed toward a particular career and more as being given the freedom to choose. His family taught him through example and gave him a deep appreciation for education, theater, music and nature. His father's advice was simple: "Go to the best. No matter what." For Virchis, that meant seeking out the strongest teachers he could find—like Marcel Marceau—and then bringing what he learned home to the

communities around him. "I always like to take people with me in my journey," he told me.

Over time, Bill was given the title of Director of Visual and Performing Arts for the Sweetwater Union High School District. As such, he inspired more students than any single classroom could have allowed. He helped expand programs in mariachi, folklórico and career-technical arts, creating opportunities for students to see the arts not simply as extracurricular activities, but as something they could pursue seriously. "If you can't see it, you can't do it." That idea was central to his work. Students needed to see their cultures represented. They needed to see artistic careers as possible. They needed to see themselves belonging in places they might never have imagined entering. The program eventually became nationally recognized, and in 2012, Sweetwater named its Visual and Performing Arts Department after him. And yet, for Virchis, "a play is never really about the person standing center stage".

ACT III. EVERY STUDENT GETS A SPOTLIGHT

Why spend decades building programs, teaching classes, directing productions and creating opportunities? Bill believes the answer has little to do with producing actors. Theater, to him, is about producing people. "Drama isn't just fun, it's a behavioral science." Theater teaches people how to communicate, work through conflict, depend on one another and



*Bill with former student J. Michael Stracyznki. Playwright, author, and Emmy Award-winning creator and writer of the television series--*Babylon 5*.*

understand perspectives beyond their own. For Virchis, learning to perform was never separate from learning how to understand people. He sees more importance in getting people on the stage and having them relearn what it means to be human than in any merit or praise a production could ever receive.

He also wanted his students to pursue what mattered to them rather than what seemed profitable. "Be true to yourself," he said. "Be passionate. Don't follow the money." His philosophy of accessibility shaped his work creating culturally accurate programs in Sweetwater schools, and in the founding of the multiethnic Teatro Máscara Mágica. He wanted students to see their own cultures represented in serious, professional artistic spaces and to imagine themselves pursuing those arts beyond high school. That need for representation was personal.

When Virchis was ten, his family traveled through Texas in his father's pink Cadillac. At a restaurant, his Mexican family was told they could not sit where they wanted. The experience stayed with him. It was one of his earliest encounters with racism, and it helped shape his understanding of what it meant to be Mexican in America. But Virchis has never been interested in hiding where he comes from. Quite the opposite. "Nopal is in my forehead," he stated, punctuating his words with fingers tapping at his temple. His Mexican identity is not something he

can—or wants to—separate from himself. It is part of the way he sees his community, his art and his responsibility to represent people who deserve to see themselves onstage. For Virchis, theater could give communities something racism often tried to take away: a voice, a presence and a place to see themselves.

"If you can't see it, you can't do it." That may be the heart of his philosophy. Theater asks people to listen, collaborate and understand perspectives beyond their own. It gives people a place to see themselves, but also a reason to see one another. For Virchis, putting a student onstage was never simply about teaching the student how to perform. It was about teaching them that they belonged there.

ACT IV. CURTAIN CALL

After a lifetime in theater, William Virchis measures his legacy in people. He sees it in former students who became artists and teachers themselves, in the families who return to La Pastorela year after year, and in children who grew up watching their parents perform and eventually found their own place in the tradition. The production has now reached four generations of actors and audiences, turning a play into a tradition that families carry with them. "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers," he confessed, quoting Tennessee Williams like a second nature. Whether those

strangers nature. Whether those strangers became his students, purchased tickets to his productions, or simply crossed paths with him at the right moment, Virchis remembers his life as something built with them. For Bill, those strangers became mentors, colleagues, friends and eventually family. His legacy is not the opportunities he created or the stages he built, but the people who found a place on them.

And that brings us back to the heartbeat of Virchis's story: "Theater saved my life." When I first met Virchis, and he told me if I learned anything about him, I should remember that phrase, I saw it as a statement about his past. After being in a room with him and feeling the weight of the stories he spun so effortlessly, I realized that those four words were a tribute to his life's work, the ongoing inspiration he still sparks every day.

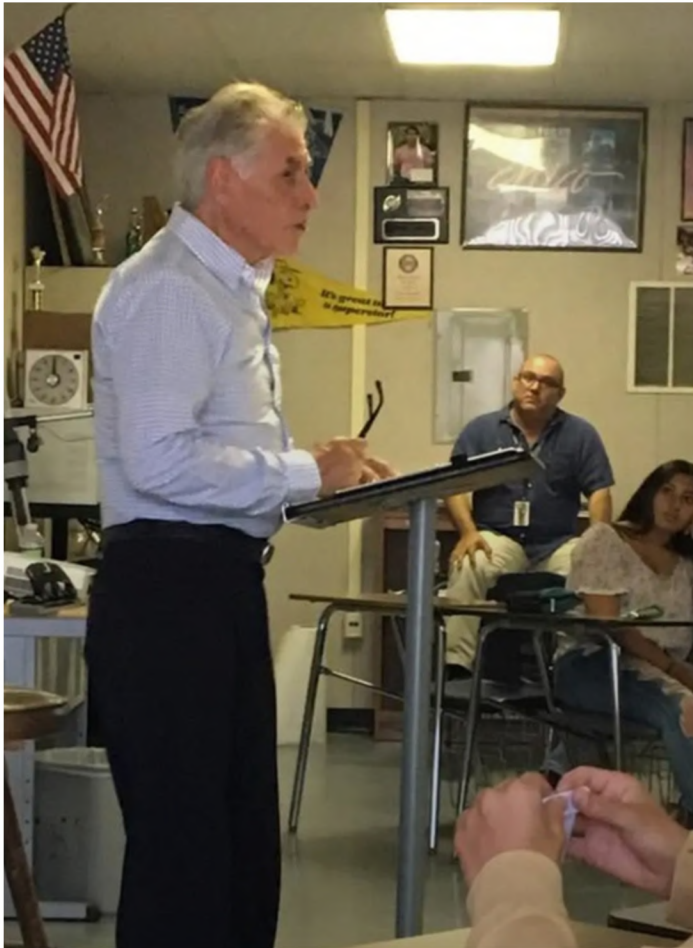
That life he breathes out is apparent in all that he does. Very early on in our conversation, I realized that Virchis rarely spoke with only his voice. He talked with his head, his shoulders and even his feet. His entire body tilted forward when he remembered something funny, and his face seemed to arrive at the punchline a moment before his words did. Even the few times he sat still, he seemed to be moving toward something. Perhaps towards something found within a story his father had taught him, one he now carries with him wherever he goes. "What's the

most important part of what makes a car move?" Bill asked in his father's voice. "People go, 'gas, tires, motor...' but they're wrong. See, the only thing that will make it go, it's called a spark. Without the spark, you don't go anywhere. We can have everything, but without a spark, well, it ain't gonna go, baby." After a pause, Virchis brought the idea full circle. "That's what theater does. It creates a spark. Moves you forward. You can't help it. Without a spark we're nothing."

Maybe that was the thing he had been moving towards all along. The spark was not simply something Bill talked about—it seemed to be the very reason his hands would



Rehearsal of Journey of the Skeletons directed by Mr. Virchis and performed at the La Jolla Playhouse



Sharing a message of motivation and inspiration

choreograph his every thought and his voice would turn a memory from sixty years ago into something that felt like it had just happened. Theater gave Bill a place where being different was okay, where all his energy had somewhere to go, and where the spark could be passed down. And perhaps that is why theater saved his life.

ACT V. EPILOGUE

Bill felt it important to thank the family and friends who have been the cornerstone of his success. "My Familias. My brother Ricardo, my sister Martha, and their families. My two sons, Adam and Jason and their families including Adam's daughter/my grand daughter True Grace Virchis, and Bonnie Coffey, their mother. My God-child Celina Burgueno, Mary Carmen Perez and her wonderful family Enrique, Isaiah, Gilbert, Melissa, and Sabrina. Thank you to my Teatro Máscara Mágica family: President Luis Aragon, the Board of Directors and Advisors, along with all the actors, technicians, playwrights, and interns. Thank you to all the organizations who have contributed along the way: Old Globe theater, San Diego Repertory Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, Moonlight Theater, San Diego Historic Old Town (Chuck Ross with Hometown Hospitality, Stephanie and Robert Horsman), Casa Familiar, KUSI's Tommy Sablan, Southwestern College, Sweetwater Union High School District, and all the audiences and patrons. Last, my sincere thank you to Isabela Leon, my assistant for 38 years. You have been the foundation for what we have achieved."

LIFE

*The curtain goes up, and before it goes down, we laugh and we cry,
we smile and we frown. We see "Life" on the stage; the theater is
"us." We realize, we wonder, we ask "is it thus?"*

*We know that it is, and we know who we are. Going backwards and
forwards in our play, we are the Star!*

- Author Unknown



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CITY DEPUTY MAYOR CESAR FERNANDEZ

by Jeff Bettger

Welcome to the third in our series of interviews with City of Chula Vista Councilmembers. Councilmember Cesar Fernandez represents District 4, which includes the southwest portion of Chula Vista and is currently the Deputy Mayor.

Jeff Bettger: Thank you for your time, Deputy Mayor. Let's begin with your background. Where did you grow up?

CM Fernandez: You're welcome, Jeff. I spent the first half of my life in City Heights, San Diego. I went to San Diego High School for a couple of years and then graduated from Morse High School in 1991. After graduation, I went to Mesa College, then to City College, and then completed my studies at San Diego State. I began a civil engineering degree, but after meeting with civil engineering companies my junior year, I realized that my heart wasn't in it. So I switched my major to math.

It is interesting to look back. The whole time I was in college, I was an instructional aide at different San Diego Unified schools. Education was just kind of in my blood, so it just felt right to get my teaching credential and then get into a classroom. That's the short version of how I became an educator. I taught seven years in City Heights at a middle school called Monroe Clark Middle School. Then a buddy of mine, who I had met at a math conference, told me about an opening here in Sweetwater

School District at Otay Ranch High School. At that time, Sweetwater paid significantly more than San Diego Unified so I took the opportunity and made the switch.

Jeff: I believe Otay Ranch High School opened in 2003. Which year did you arrive?

CM Fernandez: I came to Chula Vista in 2006 and my life changed. At that time, my wife and I didn't know each other. She was a secretary in the counseling office. We started talking and I learned she wanted to become a teacher. We just hit it off. She was born and raised in Chula Vista and went to Castle Park. And now I'm honored to represent the Castle Park area.

Jeff: That's a great story. Do you have children?

CM Fernandez: Between us, we have three. We have hers, who's the oldest. We have mine, who is the second oldest, and we have ours, who's a 14-year-old.

Jeff: Nice. When you began teaching at Otay Ranch, you were a math teacher?

CM Fernandez: Yeah, I taught math for 13 years, including extended algebra, which divided algebra into two years for students that struggled with math, to pre-calculus. Then the district posted a job opening for a special assignment teacher to coordinate the before and after school programs. This was something that



Always an educator at heart.



Deputy Mayor Cesar Fernandez prioritizes green, open spaces.

I did and enjoyed when I was back in City Heights. We had a model after-school program. Governor Schwarzenegger came to our school and said every after-school program should be like yours.

Based on that experience, I wanted to go in that direction again. I now help coordinate the ASES and the Assets grants, which are before and after school program grants for middle schools and high schools here in Sweetwater Union High School District. I've been doing that for the past eight years and I love it.

Jeff: What kind of activities are available for students after school?

CM Fernandez: A lot of the middle school programs are based on sports. Most people don't know this, but Sweetwater was the first district to have a middle school athletic league in San Diego County. We also support audio visual programs, such as school video bulletins. We support the arts. A lot of schools have a competitive cheer squad. We help fund folklorico bands after school. We have even started eSports teams about four years ago.

All kinds of stuff, you name it, whatever the kids are interested in, we're going to try to provide that for them. So our goal is to keep them on campus during the critical hours of 6:00am to 6:00pm having fun and learning something.

Jeff: For students who don't have computers at home or Wi-Fi, are there tutors available to help them with schoolwork?

CM Fernandez: Yes, tutoring is available.

Jeff: Thank you. Those are much needed services. To change the subject a little bit. What kind of general challenges have you seen families facing now that might not have existed 10 years ago?

CM Fernandez: You know, our enrollment has gone down at several schools. And so when you ask what are parents struggling with, I think they're struggling with the cost of living here and they're moving away or they're deciding not to have kids.

Jeff: Interesting and sad. Changing the topic again, I have a theory. I think that people who are educators make strong public

servants because they get to see the full spectrum of families and kids and hear what they're going through in real time. What made you decide to run for city council?

CM Fernandez: You know, I'm glad you brought that up, Jeff. You make an important point and I'm basically just going to echo what you said. I believe that educators should be at the forefront of making decisions at every level of government. You're right.

We see people's kids every day. We see the struggles of those children. We see the struggles of their parents. And so having that perspective provides the drive for me to commit to this level of public service. And so ultimately, it's kids that got me into politics.

I realized that I can affect a certain number of kids in the classroom, and I love that work. It's teaching them a subject and understanding them as a person and as a learner. But then when I decided to run for school board, it was because I wanted to affect more kids, but in a policy kind of

way. I always intended to at least do two terms on the Chula Vista Elementary School Board to make sure I could see some of those changes through. But then this city council seat opened up a lot sooner than I thought it would. I felt that this was my time and my calling. Now I want to improve the whole community, not just for kids, but also for families and seniors. But kids are always in my heart and in my mind.

Jeff: Jumping ahead, now that you won that council seat, what are your responsibilities? For example, besides the Tuesday night council meetings, what kind of time commitment does being a council member require? What are some of the tasks required to prepare for the meetings?

CM Fernandez: There's a lot of time required. Preparation for those meetings is key. Often these agenda packets are just so huge you need your staff to help make it digestible for you as a council member. And then we have to sit down and decide how do these decisions fit into my priorities? Then there's the constituent engagement piece, which is something I campaigned on. I try to do a community event at least once every two months. I try to have a theme. The last one was an education theme. I had a school board member there. I had a trustee from Southwestern College. People had the opportunity to talk with me about specific issues. So all of that planning and execution takes time. And we also have assignments, such as different

regional boards that we sit on. I happen to sit on the transit service MTS. And Jeffrey, let me tell you, those agendas and materials are like 500 pages, right? So yeah, a lot of time commitment, not just to council meetings, but outside as well.

Jeff: How big is your staff?

CM Fernandez: I have one full-time staff member. I have three hourly staff members and three interns. Two of them are already in college, one of them going to San Diego State.

Jeff: I like these interviews to be informative regarding HOW our government works. I want to ask about the many city commissions. How do the commissions work and how does their work inform the city council?

CM Fernandez: We have 18 boards and commissions. Most of them are either mayor appointed or council appointed, but some of them are very high level and require interviews, such as our planning commission. They will make recommendations on items that appear on the council's agenda. We get to hear their recommendations as part of the staff report. Normally we hear recommendations from the planning commission, the traffic commission, sustainability and the arts. Many of the other commissions go through the planning commission.

Jeff: Thank you for that explanation. The boards and commissions give the general public an opportunity to be more involved in government if they want, by applying to be on one of

the commissions.

CM Fernandez: Yes, for example, there is housing and homelessness commission and an aging and wellness commission as well.

Jeff: Chula Vista is touched by many issues these days. Immigration, sewage spills from from the Tijuana River, coastal development, the high cost of living. How do you balance all of these?

CM Fernandez: It's tough. There's really no problem that I can solve myself. I balance it by working with other elected officials across the region. Right now, MTS, the transit system, is grappling with a huge deficit. So that requires me to work with other elected officials from the city of San Diego and the city of La Mesa, to solve those problems. For the sewage crisis from the Tijuana



Scheduled in-person opportunities for the public to discuss issues of concern.

River Valley and on homelessness, I lean heavily on County Supervisor Aguirre to lead the way and let me know how to support those efforts from the city council dais. It's the same thing with the Port Authority. We work together to decide how the land is used, but at the end of the day, that land belongs to the Port and they have the final decision.

Jeff: Thank you. What advice would you give to somebody interested in a career in public service?

CM Fernandez: First you should go do an internship either with an elected official or in a government office just to see how it works and see which side you want to be on. Because in my opinion, it's all service. From people that work in our various departments to the city manager and of course, to the elected officials. It's all public service. At the end of the day, you're just trying to do what's right for residents of your city. So do an internship and see if that's really what you want to do. The other thing I would say is you need to be out in the community. You need to visit or be a part of different organizations.

Jeff: That's great. I believe many people feel like, oh, the government's got to take care of everything. They have endless money. They should fix it all. What are some things that residents can do to improve the city?

CM Fernandez: We'd love to have more people be part of city clean up events. In general, we need more people to show up. I mean, we had a few budget meetings and honestly only about 20 people

showed up and I'd say at least a dozen of them were staff. That's step one. The second step is to just reach out to your representative. I had a person reach out to me about the park just south of Castle Park High School, letting me know that the gazebos were torn up and the playground was old. So I got right on it. The city staff told me that they could get it done in about six months. For bigger projects, like repaving a road, there's a whole process for that and it costs big money.

Jeff: Jumping way ahead, when you finally retire from public service, what do you think you're going to look back at and be most proud of?

CM Fernandez: Wow, you went deep on that one. So one of the things that I'm most proud of is that I advocate for access to green spaces and creating green spaces. For example, we're going to make a little park here on the corner of Oxford and 4th. That's going to provide just a tiny bit more green space for people to enjoy. Also, when the developers of the Pangea project came to me to present, I said, "Listen, if this development doesn't provide either free or low cost access for people in my community, then I can't get behind this." They have this grandiose plan of a sports and hospitality complex with a tennis stadium and tennis courts. If adults and kids that live in Chula Vista don't have access to those tennis courts for either free or a reduced price, I don't want the development. Same with the soccer fields. Same with the

proposed water polo. So me just fighting for that community access is important. I bring that up because I often hear that people feel shut out of the Gaylord and that's a place where I haven't even stayed yet. This area has produced so many great Little League baseball and softball teams such as Parkview, Eastlake, Sweetwater, and many teams from TJ. I keep advocating for a tournament grade baseball and softball facility. Baseball and softball are in our blood. I'll continue to support baseball and softball as long as I'm on the council.

Jeff: And maybe a performing arts center at some point?

CM Fernandez: Absolutely. You know, I was hoping to build a multipurpose center as part of the Pangea project. A combined eSports and performing arts center. I think that's very possible. Yes, absolutely.

Jeff: Is there anything else you would like to add? I tried to ask a wide range of topics, and I really appreciate all your answers.

CM Fernandez: Just let folks know that they can contact me anytime. It's easy to get me on e-mail, and I definitely will respond. Like I mentioned, I host community events about once every two months, sometimes once a month. You can find all of those activities on my official Instagram account, which is Chula_Vista_District_4. Notice the underscores in between each word. Let me know how you think we can make Chula Vista better and I'll do my best to work on that.

Jeff: Thank you again Deputy Mayor for your time and for your service to our community.

A NEW VISION FOR BROADWAY AVENUE

by Julio Martha

On August 15th, community members and local artists joined forces to paint 13 dull utility boxes to beautify Broadway Avenue north of H Street. From well-established artists to emerging ones, everyone got the opportunity to share their talent.

Artists were happy to share their art in the neighborhoods where they live. Several mentioned the pride their kids felt seeing a parent's painting near their school, and then telling their friends. As we painted, community members stopped by to say thank you for beautifying the streets.

The project was led by ENVISION BROADWAY, a coalition of volunteers working together with local artists to improve the safety and beauty of Broadway. This project follows numerous street clean-up events and also art exhibits at the Chula Vista Center curated by ART THROUGH THE GLASS.

A second Community Paint Day is already planned for October for the remaining boxes, giving more local artists the opportunity to contribute their art: IG @EnvisionBroadway



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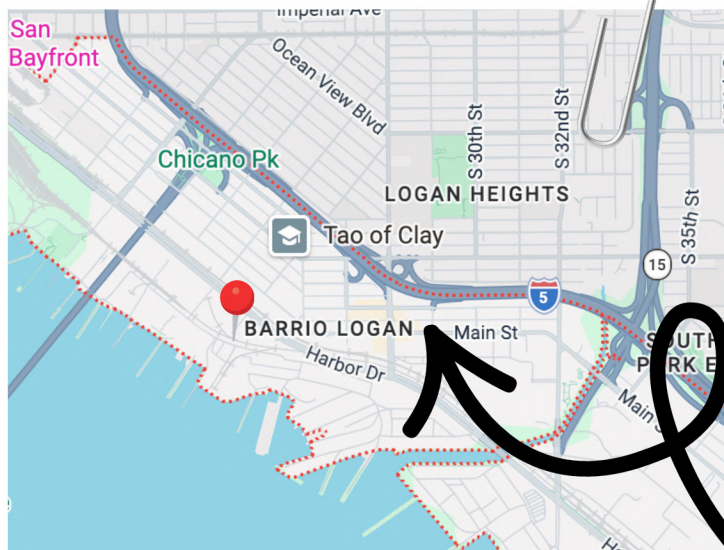
The Towne Local Chula Vista magazine will have a table at CV ArtFest! Stop by and grab a copy of your favorite articles. Also meet many of the artists who had appeared in our past issues!



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 san diego art directory
our local art scene





MEET US AT
Barrio Logan

The Towne Local
spotlights Barrio Logan's
local businesses and the
people behind them.

Read on to meet them.



CLOTHING A COMMUNITY THE STORY OF SEW LOKA

In this issue, we throw the spotlight on Logan Avenue in Barrio Logan. We know. Barrio Logan isn't geographically in the South Bay, but the people, place, and history are so amazing, we couldn't resist. The following articles highlight three powerful artists who are making Logan Avenue a special place. In the previous March 2026 issue, we interviewed Michael Falcon, owner of **Raspados Shave Ice**, about the history of the Logan Avenue art scene. In this article, we introduce an artist who is doing magic with fabric.

"YoU aRe sO cRaZy"

Claudia Rodriguez-Biezunski is the co-owner of Sew Loka located at 2113 Logan Avenue. When I told my daughter that I was going to interview Claudia, she said, "Oh, she's really famous." After spending 10 minutes with Claudia in her sewing haven/art gallery/community center, I knew why. She is passionate about all the good things--from repurposing fabric to creating new clothing to supporting her community.

My first question was about her choice of the store name, Sew Loka. Claudia explained, "Growing up, I was always goofy. I always heard people say, you're so crazy. I've always loved playing with words. In Spanish, loca means crazy and I wanted to use sewing in the name. So I came up with Sew Loka."

GROWING UP IN LA

Claudia grew up with six siblings. Her father was a denim distributor who worked out of the family's garage. Wanting to spend more time with her father, Claudia offered to help. After not doing well cutting elastic, she was initially given floor sweeping duty. Claudia remembers, "Being with my dad and hanging out with him and working together was really like comforting for me."

Her dad began making jackets and school uniforms at affordable prices. "I think he really wanted to create items for our community that probably they couldn't afford, like selling a polo shirt for \$5 instead of them having to pay \$20," she proudly explains. "We would then sell them at the swap meet. That was the hardest part for me. At that time, the swap meets were not cool. My dad wanted me to call customers over to our booth." Her dad paid her \$5 a day, which allowed young Claudia to learn how to manage her money. Looking back, these early sales and money lessons were invaluable.

TEN YEARS IN AN OFFICE

As she reached her 20's, Claudia began working as a receptionist for a physical therapy clinic in Van Nuys. She enjoyed the work and the company ownership was kind to her. However, one day, the

office held a celebration for one of her office friends who had been there for 10 years. It struck Claudia, "I was like, that's a really long time. I don't know if I could be here for 10 years, you know? I started having a midlife crisis where I'm like what am I going to do with my life?" With both parents' being immigrants from Mexico, Claudia felt that going to college was a bit overwhelming. Seeing what her parents had been able to accomplish and with her business experience growing up, Claudia felt she could run her own business. She was bilingual, resourceful, and knew how to sew.

MOVING TO SAN DIEGO

Moving out of LA, Claudia first opened a space in Banker's Hill that was an artisan collective for her friends to sell their work. But when customers saw a sewing machine, she received requests to do alterations. Because times were tight financially, she did alterations for the next five years. But soon, her desire to be more creative became overwhelming, and she found a new home on Logan Ave.

Just as Sew Loka was beginning, COVID hit. With 22 bins of donated fabric, Claudia began making masks and handing them out for free. "I was raised to basically be of service to other and when needed to be able to rise to the occasion," she explains. All told, Sew Loka made 10,000 masks. "For me, sewing has always been very therapeutic and something that really allows me to slow down."



ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

As the COVID crisis ended, Claudia knew she wanted to create her own brand. Her husband, Manny, quit his job managing a delivery service and helped her create the business website, do the videography and "all of the technical stuff for the business." Claudia then explained with great passion that textile waste is the #2 pollutant in the world. I was shocked to find out that it takes 1,800 gallons of water to create one pair of jeans. That includes the water needed to grow the cotton, then dye the cotton in the darkest indigo, then 25 to 45 baths to produce the traditional light blue denim color we desire.

Claudia began asking herself, "How do I enter this realm but be responsible and not create more waste?" She realized that she could take a shirt with a bleach stain and find a way to hide it or make it part of a new design. She wanted people to value what goes into the clothes they buy and wear. Claudia recounts, "We've had that food awakening moment where we want to know where our chicken comes from. But society hasn't had that reflection with our clothes yet." She believes it is important for people to know who's making their clothes.

FREE CLASSES

One of the most heart-warming aspects of Sew Loka's activities is the free classes offered every Thursday from 6:00-8:00pm. Community members can learn how to sew by using one of the many sewing machines lined up neatly in the colorful store. One week Claudia might teach them how to make a little zipper pouch, then perhaps a tote bag the next week, and eventually a pair of pants or a shirt. Making it a family business, their daughter comes and helps at times.

CUSTOM CREATIONS

But the true heart of Sew Loka are the custom jackets that Claudia makes from recycled, repurposed and reclaimed fabrics. "They're start to finish, which means that we cut the sleeves, we cut the back, we cut every single piece, and then we sew it all together and we built the whole entire jacket."



As you can see from the photos, these jackets are true pieces of art. Pieces can reflect a group's sports team or perhaps a person's favorite memory. Particularly meaningful are the pieces Claudia creates for people who have lost loved ones. For example, she can take pieces of clothing from the deceased loved one and create a new piece. One such piece boldly displayed the words "Legends Never Die" across the back shoulders. (When I shared a family story as to why seeing these jackets was particularly emotional for me, I realized she probably hears lots of similar stories. And maybe that is the highest compliment an artist can receive.)

COMMUNITY

I began this article and this series with the proclamation that something special is happening on Logan Avenue right now. I asked Claudia what brought her here. "When they sold the building in Bankers Hill, we needed to find a new place. My friends suggested we look in Barrio Logan. I remember we came during the day and one of the things that really hit home for me was that there were ladies walking around that looked like they could be my mom. It felt like home to me," Claudia fondly recalls, "There is like a frequency of

artists creating and like this ambition and drive. There's this feeling of buzz in the air. It's the consolidation of so much Chicano and Mexican-American and Latino culture here. There's a lot of pride in that we have space for expression and creativity."

THE FUTURE

To conclude, I asked Claudia about her wishes for the future of Logan Avenue and for Sew Loka. Not surprisingly, she first discussed the importance of keeping spaces affordable for artists to rent. "If we don't support the businesses owned and operated by Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, and Latinos, if accelerates gentrification. It allows big companies to come in here and to sit on the space for a couple of years until the property value really increases and then put in a Starbucks or something. We have to practice conscious capitalism."

As for the future of Sew Loka, Claudia smiles and explains that she tries to focus on the day-to-day. She mentions a possible web series in collaboration with KPBS. She mentions that eventually having a bigger space would allow her to have more textile artists come in and teach. It would allow for more artists to display their work on the walls. "I think one of my biggest goals is to have a solo art show at the Cheech Marin Chicano Museum in Riverside. It is one of the largest collections of Chicano art. I feel like sewing is art. Every demographic of immigrants has a connection to sewing." Last, Claudia proudly shared that four of her custom jackets will be displayed in Terminal 1 of the San Diego Airport starting in November. This will be the second time her pieces has been featured there.

After spending an hour talking with Claudia and touring Sew Loka, I was envious that not all neighborhoods have a Claudia. Somebody who brings the community together and who is there during times of emergency and need. Somebody who bring joy and art during the happy times. Somebody who sprinkles love on their street. As Claudia says, *"There's some magic that happens here."*



THE FUTURE OF FOOD: THE TRANSBORDER MENU

By Blanca Esthela Castañeda García

The recurring question of what constitutes the heart of Mexican cuisine has a ubiquitous presence in the United States food and restaurant industries, as Mexican workers make up an essential portion of the nation's farmers, kitchen staff, and customers. For those San Diegans whose diets and local restaurants are undeniably inspired by flavors from across the border, the question hits closer to home, and so does the answer. "The people that make the food are the heart of it!" Chef Lety Gonzalez exclaims earnestly.

Born and raised in San Diego as a first-generation Mexican American, Chef Lety grew up balancing work and school. "My food is based on my family's migration from Mexico," Lety explains, as her mother's side of the family originated in Guanajuato while her father's side comes from Jalisco. "I refer to my cooking as 'Comida Fronteriza' not only for its Mexican flavors, but because it is made with the techniques and refinement I learned while working in fine dining here in San Diego County."

Currently based in Barrio Logan and City Heights, Chef Lety brings her 'Comida Fronteriza' to the market through her company, Brujas Cocina. Founded upon her understanding of the importance of Mexican workers in the U.S. food industry, the company has several goals. Chef Lety wants to nourish Southeast San Diego by cultivating local talent and championing low-carbon-footprint culinary techniques that highlight the ingredients naturally found in our transborder region. "When I started Brujas Cocina, it was to tell the story of my family's migration and food flavor profiles. During this time, I made the choice to start my education on sustainability due to the "farm to table" practice I already had in place.

"In the pandemic, I needed to make money, so I started selling mole, then tortillas, pozole verde, and then



making tamales. I was really getting more into the traditional flavors of my family,” she says. “I kept developing the company, started doing pop-ups, leading workshops, and teaching others about food and its origins.” Nowadays, Brujas Cocina also offers catering services featuring diverse taco options, such as soft squash blossoms accompanied by melted Chihuahua cheese or braised dried beef with pickled vegetables covered in salsa roja. The menu extends to breakfast items that recall childhood memories, from vanilla-seasoned pancakes to crunchy beef milanesa, among many other offerings. She recently provided the gourmet menu for the five-year anniversary celebration of one of Logan Ave’s favorite businesses-- Raspado Shave Ice.

As with all great chefs, Chef Lety has paid her culinary dues. Starting out as a dishwasher at the San Diego Zoo while still in high school, Chef Lety is no stranger to the diverse cuisines that make up the city’s food scene. “I’ve always worked in kitchens because it’s a steady gig,” she says. Her résumé includes positions at the Lincoln Room on Fourth Avenue before it was replaced by The Commons Bar, as well as the now-defunct seafood gastropub Ritual Tavern in North Park. “It wasn’t until I worked at Uptown Tavern in Hillcrest that I decided to give culinary arts my full attention. In five years I went from line cook to executive chef.”

Around this time, the Brujas Cocina project was unexpectedly paused by the pandemic, leading her to return to restaurant kitchens. After joining WestBrew in Del Mar, navigating a medical emergency, restarting Brujas Cocina, and returning to school to pursue a degree in sustainability, Lety was hired to open Huerta Taco Stand, then to change the menu and stream line the cafe, and then the pizza department. She was finally given the position of Executive Chef of Fox Point Farms, running all 5 culinary departments.

“My grandmother passed away in 2024, and despite being appointed executive chef over five culinary departments, I felt treated unjustly. I felt there was discrimination, and unable to embrace my position to the fullest and to succeed at my job,” she recalls. “I saw them trying to cultivate a culture that felt like a farce and lacked the diversity where it was needed. It reminded me of social injustice that occurs with food luxury. At this time, I realized my ethos and moral standards did not align with theirs, so I left to come back to a community where I could utilize my skills.”

The conviction that drives her cooking goes hand in hand with her identity as an artist. Lety also holds a degree from the Brooks Institute of Photography. “When I attended Sweetwater High School, I had a photography



BRUJAS COCINA

COMIDA FRONTERA

MENU

ENFRIMOLADAS DE HUITLACOCHÉ -
QUESADILLAS, HUITLACOCHÉ, EPAZOTE FRÍJOLE NEGRO, MOLE ROJO, SALSA BANDERA, COTIJA CHEESE, JAMAICA PICKLED ONIONS,

FLOR DE CALABASA TACO -
QUESO CHIHUAHUA, SALSA MACHA, FLOR DE CALABASA

TACO DE CARNITAS -
SLOWCOOKED PORK SHOULDER, HOJA SANTA SALSA VERDE, JAMCIA PICKLED ONIONS,

ACHIOTE BEER BATTERED SEABASS -
ACHIOTE MARINATED LOCAL SEABASS, PURPLE CABBAGE CURTIO, QUESO COTIJA, SALSA ROJA, MEXICAN CREMA

TAMAL DE CHOCOLATE -
CHOCOLATE INFUSED MASA - REQUESON, MOLE ROJO, CREME AUGLAISE, ROASTED COCOA NIBS

TOSTADA BOTANA
TOSTADA DE NOPAL, AVOCADO MOUSE, ORANGE SEGMENTS, CHILE DEL ARBOL PICKLED CUCUMBER, JAMAICA PICKLED ONIONS, PITAYA CHAMOY, SAL DE CHAPLIN

JULY 24 - SAMPSON STREET
4PM - 8PM

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teacher, Tommy Bryant, who pushed me into photography,” she explains. She landed an internship at SLAMM Magazine, a music publication that was eventually purchased and transformed into the alternative newspaper CityBeat. “I got to work under Troy Johnson (current owner of San Diego Magazine) as my boss, and from there I became involved in the music scene. I was a merchandise girl, then tour manager, music promoter for Bar Eleven, and managed local bands, all while still working in kitchens.”

Watching Chef Lety prepare her creative breakfast menu on Logan Ave during a recent Logan Ave Art Walk, she looks right at home. “There is a vibe on Logan Ave. I feel like I can be me. First and foremost, everyone here is an artist, and I love that. And because of that, I feel that I can express myself in different ways that I can’t do in other places.”

When asked about her future, Chef Lety comments, “So the future for me is to be more present with myself, my food, and my community, continue what I’m doing now and see where the world takes me from

there. But have faith in Creator and in my ancestors that I am on the right path.”

In America’s finest city, its proximity to Mexico is conducive to innovation, yet preserves the traditions brought over and lovingly combined like great moles by chefs who bring together communities in San Diego. Eating a meal prepared by Chef Lety is more than a meal. It is a passionate education about different native ingredients, different recipe traditions, and, most importantly, it is an inspiring opportunity to partake in the dishes a chef who is a true artist. Eating her food, your body knows that you are eating “real” food. Now in its 5th year, Brujas Cocina continues to tell the story of the farmer and the hands that tend the land, and to feed her community. Contributing to the future, Chef Lety is also proud to be on the board of Chef Angels, (www.ChefAngels.org) an innovative, non-profit culinary outreach program for San Diego County Youth.

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Chef Lety can be contacted via Instagram at @BrujadDeLaCocinaSD



By Blanca Esthela Castañeda García

Amongst the eclectic buildings that adorn Logan Avenue stands a bright pink, brick-and-mortar shop with red tiles. A custom mural on the storefront by artists Patty Galceran-Coli depicts the figures of two women picking flowers on both sides of the bold name of the store: Local Brown Baby. Founded by artist and creative director Jiyan Rios Zandi, this recently-opened shop looks forward to supporting local artists through its business opportunities, education resources, art crafting space, and even pantry items. In regard to the name, Jiyan explains “I always really wanted to highlight the underdogs and artists who deserved more of a spotlight, and through telling my own story as an artist, others are able to connect.”

Behind the name is a moment of inspiration from years ago. While preparing for a photography exhibition, as an artwork signature, Jiyan came up with

the phrase “Support Your Local Brown Baby.” The motto resonated as familiar enough and seamlessly fitted her experience as an artist. She began employing it often, as it evoked strong reactions with audiences. She eventually turned it into a social media brand. “I started posting on Instagram and interacting with others,” she says.

Jiyan’s story is rooted in her family’s history and heritage. Raised in Chula Vista and Bonita, her cultural experience came at the hands of her mom’s Mexican heritage and her dad’s Kurdish heritage. “I grew up in my dad’s grocery store business, youngest of four kids, working class parents. So, as they were busy, my grandma would baby sit us, take us on the bus to Third Avenue, buy us tickets for the movies at the Vogue Theater, and then we would hide under the seats as the first movie ended to stay and watch the others,” she

laughs while reminiscing.

Moreover, the experiences of her family immigrating to San Diego form the basis of her shop's mission and vision, "Through my childhood, as my dad had arrived as a political refugee in 1976, he always made sure that my siblings and I were proud to be Kurdish through food, music, and dance. But it was in college at the University of Berkeley that I decided on owning that identity and started expressing through my art, using it in photography and writing. I started taking pictures of my friends in Kurdish clothes with Nikes on, with hoops on, and kind of mixing the subcultures with the traditional, mixing the modern with the traditional." Based on growing popularity and demand, Jiyan created an online store selling Local Brown Baby shirts and accessories.

Realizing that she needed to be more creative than what a typical job would allow, Jiyan took the leap and rented a small space inside the Art Hub on Logan Avenue. Here she met her future husband, Rafael Rios, a talented jewelry maker, metalsmith, and tintype photographer. Two years later, a business space next door became available, and the Local Brown Baby store was born. With its recent grand opening, Local Brown Baby extends Jiyan's creativity through her carefully curated and designed products, featuring vibrant merchandise, such as tote bags, art prints, stickers, hats, jerseys, bandanas, shirts, and a book section on cultural topics. "I expanded the store's items to include pantry items, such as olive oil and spices, to pay homage to my dad's grocery store background and expressing the culinary side of my cultures," she highlights. A section is designated for a rotating list of local creators whose products range from candles, stationery, soaps, shampoos, and other handmade products, thus providing a platform for emerging artists.

At the core of Local Brown Baby, being able to provide a safe space on Logan Avenue for expression through family and culture is Jiyan's strength. "After college, I struggled to find an artistic community in the Bay Area or Los Angeles.

I never felt truly embraced until I came to Barrio Logan," she says, "I believe that us artists are vessels. We are vessels for a message, and for me, it is through the message that I stay connected to my creativity."

Thinking of the future, Jiyan wants to help other local creators build their brand and business, using her knowledge and experience, "to elevate creators who have the same dream that I had to be a full-time artist." Additionally, Jiyan has always seen Brown Baby as a character, not just an expression. Her dream is to write a comic book or sci-fi novel with Brown Baby as the main character. "I want to evolve the media of Brown Baby from photography and writing to creating a movie."

Visit Jiyan and Local Brown Baby at 2159 Logan Ave., San Diego, CA 92113
www.LocalBrownBaby.com and
at Instagram @LocalBrownBaby.





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