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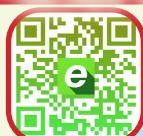
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A Message from the Santa Cruz County School Superintendent

“True education is about awakening a love of learning in the hearts of children” -Vincent Van Gogh

**HAPPY
VALENTINES
DAY**



**Maya Donnelly
Santa Cruz County
School Superintendent**

**&
Staff**

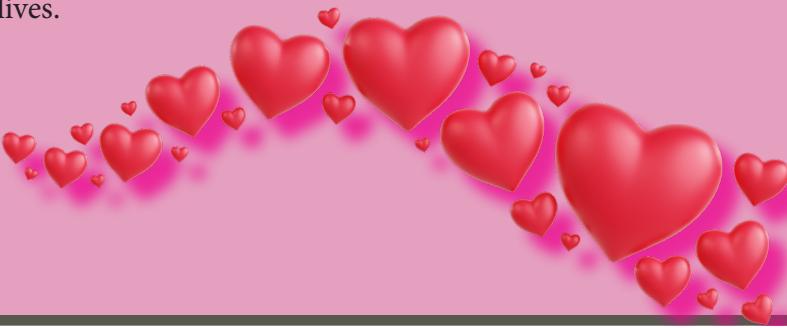
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Border Eco Updates

Happy Valentine's Day from Border Eco Magazine!

To our Border Eco readers, thank you for being part of a community that values connection, reflection, and the stories that bind us together. Your continued support allows us to highlight the people, places, and issues that matter most across our region. As Valentine's Day approaches, it offers a meaningful pause in an often chaotic world, a moment to step back from the noise, the headlines, and the urgency of daily life, and to reflect on the simple but powerful forces of love and peace. These are not abstract ideals; they are choices we make every day in how we treat one another, how we listen, and how we show up for our communities.

Valentine's Day also reminds us of the importance of family in all its forms, those we are born into and those we choose. In uncertain times, family provides grounding, continuity, and a sense of belonging that helps us weather change and conflict. It is within families that values are passed down, resilience is built, and compassion is practiced first. As we celebrate love this season, may we hold space for gratitude, reconciliation, and kindness, and recommit ourselves to nurturing the relationships that sustain us and bring meaning to our lives.



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Please send us information on any upcoming events, meetings, or programs to share with our readers.

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Los Padres Program: Tiny Hands, Big Flavors, Families Flip for Healthy Futures

On the morning of January 15th, the Nils Urman Community Kitchen was filled with the sounds of laughter, the sizzling of a hot griddle, and the proud, messy joy of children carefully stirring batter. Under the banner of "Children's Menu: Healthy Nutrition," the Los Padres Program transformed breakfast into a foundation for lifelong wellness, one pancake at a time.

Hosted by the Santa Cruz County School Superintendent's Office, the event transformed the downtown kitchen into a vibrant classroom without walls. Parents, wide-eyed children, and home educators gathered not just to listen but to engage, rolling up their sleeves and diving into the hands-on experience of creating healthy food together.

The star of the show? A deceptively simple stack of pancakes. But these weren't just any pancakes; they were nutritious and wholesome, proof that building better habits can start with a single, delicious bite. The true magic, however, lay not in the ingredients but in the collaboration.

"Families come together, with a child carefully pouring batter or proudly flipping a pancake, that's where real learning occurs. This experience goes beyond nutrition; it builds confidence and transforms the notion of 'having to' into 'getting to.' When a child participates in making the food, they become excited to eat it."

The room hummed with energy. Small hands whisked and mixed, their faces lit with concentration. Parents offered gentle guidance, creating a powerful, hands-on lesson in teamwork and health. The message was clear: the family that cooks together builds a foundation of wellness together.

This group effort goes beyond just cooking together. The successful morning was a testament to a broader coalition dedicated to strengthening Santa Cruz County families. Spearheaded by Superintendent Maya M. Donnelly and the Los Padres Program, the initiative brought together key partners, including First Things First, Mariposa Community Health Center, and South32. Their collective support underscores a shared belief: a community's health is built from the ground up, starting with its youngest members and the families who nurture them.

As the scent of warm, healthy pancakes filled the air, so did a sense of connection and possibility. It served as a reminder that sometimes, the most profound lessons are not delivered on a worksheet but served on a plate cooked up with love, a dash of fun, and the helping hands of eager children.



Why Showing Up Matters: How Santa Cruz County Residents Can Shape the Future Through Action

Change rarely arrives with a trumpet blast. More often, it starts quietly with a neighbor asking a hard question at a meeting, a student organizing their peers, or a parent refusing to accept that “this is just how things are.” In Santa Cruz County, a place defined by resilience, culture, and close-knit communities, the future depends not on distant decision-makers but on residents’ willingness to get involved, speak up, and help shape what comes next.

We are living in a moment that demands engagement. Across the nation and right here at home, communities are confronting rising inequality, environmental stress, housing challenges, and questions about trust in public institutions. These are not abstract issues debated somewhere else; they affect the cost of living in Nogales, the air we breathe near the port of entry, the opportunities available to young people after graduation, and the dignity afforded to seniors who built this county. Activism, at its core, is simply the refusal to be passive in the face of these realities.

History reminds us that progress has never been handed down politely. From civil rights to women’s suffrage to labor protections, change has always come from ordinary people deciding that silence was no longer acceptable. Those movements did not begin in halls of power; they began in living rooms, churches, classrooms, and street corners. Understanding this history matters because it shows us that activism is not a trend or a slogan; it is the engine of democracy itself.

Today’s headlines make the urgency impossible to ignore. Economic pressures squeeze families already stretched thin. Climate change intensifies water challenges and public health risks in border communities. Social inequities persist, often falling hardest on those with the least access to influence. In moments like these, opting out is not neutrality; it is permission for the status quo to continue unchecked. **Santa Cruz County does not need more spectators. It needs participants.**

Local activism, in particular, is where real change takes root. While national movements grab attention, it is local organizing that shapes zoning decisions, school funding priorities, environmental protections, and social services. When residents attend board meetings, participate in community forums, volunteer with nonprofits, or organize around shared concerns, they turn abstract problems into solvable ones. Local engagement builds trust, strengthens relationships, and reminds decision-makers that policies affect real people with real lives.

Grassroots efforts have repeatedly proven their power to influence public policy. Time and again, community-led movements have pushed issues onto agendas that once ignored them. When people organize collectively, writing letters, showing up consistently, and asking informed questions, they create pressure that lawmakers cannot dismiss. The most durable solutions are often born from these ground-level efforts, shaped by those who understand the community because they live in it.

In today’s world, activism also lives online. Social media has become a modern megaphone, capable of turning a local concern into a global conversation in a matter of hours. Digital platforms help residents share information, mobilize support, and amplify voices that might otherwise go unheard. But online activism works best when it is paired with real-world action. A post can raise awareness, but a meeting builds momentum. A hashtag can spark interest, but sustained engagement creates results.

Of course, activism is not always comfortable. It requires time, patience, and a willingness to confront difficult truths. Apathy can feel easier, especially when problems seem overwhelming. But history shows that inaction carries its own cost. Every major shift toward justice and equity has required people to step beyond convenience and into responsibility. The good news is that no one has to do it alone.

Community engagement thrives on connection. Building alliances among neighbors, advocacy groups, educators, business owners, and local organizations multiplies impact. When diverse voices come together, solutions become more creative and more inclusive. Santa Cruz County’s strength has always been its people, its cultures, its perspectives, its shared sense of place. Harnessing that diversity is not just powerful; it is essential.

Environmental activism offers a clear example of how local action intersects with global challenges. Climate change may be worldwide, but its effects are felt locally through air quality, water availability, and public health. Advocating for sustainable practices, cleaner transportation, and responsible development is about protecting both the planet and the people who call this county home. Environmental justice and social justice are inseparable, especially in communities historically burdened by limited resources.

At the heart of all activism lies personal responsibility. One voice may feel small, but collective voices create momentum. Conversations around kitchen tables, questions raised at town halls, volunteer hours given freely, these acts matter. They signal care, commitment, and belief in a shared future. **Activism is not reserved for experts or politicians; it belongs to anyone willing to engage.**

Santa Cruz County’s future will not be shaped by indifference. It will be shaped by residents who show up, stay informed, and insist on being heard. By getting involved—whether through local meetings, advocacy efforts, community events, or digital platforms, people become co-authors of the county’s story. In times of uncertainty, participation is not just powerful; it is necessary.

The invitation is open. The door is unlocked. The question is simple: who is willing to step inside and help build what comes next?

“From Border Stories to Board Leadership: Luis Carlos Davis and a Vision for Santa Cruz County”

Luis Carlos Davis has spent much of his life telling stories shaped by the border stories rooted in culture, identity, resilience, and possibility. Today, as Santa Cruz County Supervisor for District 1, Davis continues that work in a new way, translating a lifetime of creative vision and public service into policies designed to strengthen community, opportunity, and trust.

Born and raised along the Mexico–U.S. border, Davis grew up navigating two countries, two cultures, and two languages. That lived experience has long informed his work as an award-winning film director and producer, whose projects bridge arts, education, and cross-cultural storytelling. His films have been exhibited internationally across Mexico, the United States, and Latin America, earning him recognition for his ability to illuminate complex human stories with clarity and heart.

Over the years, he has been nominated for the U.S.–Mexico Cross-Border Innovation and Cooperation Awards, selected to participate in Guadalajara Talents, and honored as a “40 Under 40” Man of the Year. His selection by the Spanish Embassy and Fundación Carolina as one of ten U.S. leaders invited to Spain further cemented his role as a cultural bridge between nations.

Yet filmmaking is only one chapter of Davis's public life. An educator by training and passion, he was nominated for Teacher of the Year at the Scottsdale School of Film + Theatre in 2018 and serves as a Television Academy Faculty Fellow. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Arizona and continues to develop new documentary projects, including *El Monstruo* and *Amor Chiquito*, even as he navigates the demanding responsibilities of public office. For Davis, education, creativity, and civic leadership are not separate paths; they are deeply intertwined.

Now completing his first year as Santa Cruz County Supervisor, Davis has brought that same interdisciplinary mindset to county government. His priorities are clear and deeply personal: creating meaningful opportunities for young people, ensuring they can build their futures in Santa Cruz County after graduation, and addressing the needs of senior residents who helped shape the community. These goals guide his decision-making as the county develops a comprehensive Workforce Development Plan to expand education, training, and professional development opportunities for residents of all ages.

Central to Davis's vision is collaboration. He has emphasized the importance of deepening partnerships with the City of Nogales to create a shared plan for economic growth and community development. By aligning resources and strategies, he believes the county and city can strengthen local businesses, create jobs, and open new pathways for young people while preserving the region's unique character. “This cooperative approach is essential to building a stronger, more resilient future for the entire community,” Davis says.

Fiscal responsibility and transparency have also become defining features of Davis's tenure. Following the county treasurer's embezzlement, an issue that emerged as one of the most surprising concerns during his campaign, the county has implemented significant reforms. External audits, improved cash-handling procedures, and strengthened reconciliation processes are now in place to reduce the risk of future misconduct and recover as much as possible. In addition, the county is in the process of hiring an economic development firm to help chart a roadmap toward long-term financial stability, supporting existing businesses while attracting industries compatible with the community's values and diversity.



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“From Border Stories to Board Leadership: Luis Carlos Davis and a Vision for Santa Cruz County”

Housing affordability remains a pressing challenge, and Davis has made it a priority to support policies that encourage affordable housing development, including zoning changes. He is also working closely with local and state agencies to secure grants and funding for housing projects, with the goal of ensuring that all residents, regardless of income, have access to safe, stable, and affordable homes.

Environmental sustainability is woven into this broader vision. Recognizing the local impacts of climate change, particularly at the port of entry, Davis has advocated for the use of technology and additional staffing to reduce vehicle emissions. The installation of electric vehicle charging stations in Nogales, including one at the County Complex funded through a recent grant, represents a practical step toward cleaner transportation and a more sustainable future.

Davis has also strongly supported the County's Health and Human Services Department, which continues to secure and distribute critical grant funding. While acknowledging the need for expanded services, he remains committed to backing efforts that improve health outcomes and quality of life across Santa Cruz County.

Transparency and public engagement are cornerstones of his leadership style.

Initiatives such as the "Gov 101" program and its companion podcast aim to demystify county operations and finances, giving residents a clearer understanding of how local government works. County departments now regularly present overviews of their roles at public meetings, and communication efforts continue to expand through press releases, online resources, and open-door policies. During biweekly Board of Supervisors meetings, designated public calls ensure that community voices are heard, and Davis encourages residents to participate, ask questions, and stay engaged. Beyond formal meetings, Davis makes a point of meeting people where they are.

Through Cafecito events, college visits, nonprofit meetings, and town halls, he listens to concerns ranging from mental health and housing to water resources and economic opportunity. His belief is simple but powerful: "Lasting solutions emerge when communities are invited into the conversation." Advisory boards that reflect the county's diversity, along with the strategic use of technology to reach more residents, are part of his ongoing effort to ensure everyone feels heard and valued.

As Davis often notes, county government operates within the framework of Arizona state law, providing services largely mandated by statute and funded through property and sales taxes. Within those constraints, he sees an opportunity to build trust, improve systems, and align government more closely with the people it serves.

From international film festivals to community Cafecitos, Luis Carlos Davis continues to tell the story of Santa Cruz County, one shaped by collaboration, accountability, and the belief that when people work together, progress becomes possible.





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Rio Rico Insights

"Applause Beyond the Classroom: Honoring the Heart of Our Schools"

Educators and staff members who quietly contribute to students' success every day were honored by Tubac Rotary with warm applause and genuine appreciation. During a recent Rotary meeting, the organization honored the 2024–2025 School Year Staff of the Year, celebrating individuals whose dedication, professionalism, and compassion have left a lasting impact on their school community.

At the center of this recognition was Ms. Mary Taft from Coatimundi Middle School, named Teacher of the Year. Known for her commitment to academic excellence and her ability to connect with students in meaningful ways, Ms. Taft embodies the very best of teaching: passionate, patient, and profoundly impactful. Her work in the classroom extends beyond lesson plans, as she fosters confidence, curiosity, and a love of learning that students carry with them long after the school day ends.

Also honored was Ms. Marcia Aguirre-Fontes, recognized as Professional Staff of the Year for her behind-the-scenes leadership and unwavering dedication, which ensures that students and staff are supported every step of the way. Her role exemplifies how professionalism, organization, and care lay the foundation for successful schools.

Additionally, Mr. Ben Norzagaray was recognized as Support Staff of the Year for his work in transportation. Often the first smile students see in the morning and the last to wish them well in the afternoon, Mr. Norzagaray plays a vital role in ensuring that students arrive safely and feel welcomed each day. His recognition serves as a powerful reminder that every role in a school system is important.

The ceremony was further enriched by the presence of school leaders who came to celebrate their colleagues. Coatimundi Middle School Principal Mrs. Rebekah Cabrera, a member of the Tubac Rotary, attended the event alongside Calabasas School Principal Mr. Jonathan Chavez, who came to show his support and appreciation. Their presence highlighted the sense of community and shared pride that defines the district.

The Tubac Rotary's ongoing commitment to honoring educators and staff demonstrates a deep understanding that strong schools are built by dedicated individuals. By recognizing those who go above and beyond, the Rotary not only celebrates individual achievements but also reinforces the values of service, collaboration, and excellence in education.

As the awards were presented and applause echoed through the room, one message rang clear: these honorees are more than just employees, they are mentors, role models, and cornerstones of the community. Thanks to the Tubac Rotary and to each of this year's Staff of the Year recipients, whose daily efforts help shape brighter futures for students across our schools.

Happy Valentine's Day



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Rio Rico Insights

"Spelling Success: SCV35's Brightest Minds Compete, Inspire, and Triumph"

The auditorium buzzed with anticipation long before the first word was spoken. Parents leaned forward in their seats, teachers whispered last-minute encouragement, and a row of students stood poised at the microphone, nervous, focused, and ready. The SCV35 District Spelling Bee was more than just a competition; it was a celebration of dedication, discipline, and the quiet confidence that comes from hours spent mastering words one syllable at a time.

One by one, students from across the district stepped into the spotlight, spelling words that twisted tongues and tested nerves. Each pause before a letter felt electric, and each correct answer drew smiles, applause, and a renewed sense of possibility. Representing Calabasas School were Diego Padilla, Elian Sanchez, Santiago Limas, and Dante Nunez-Campos, all of whom demonstrated poise and determination beyond their years. Mountain View Elementary's Alexis Downie and Sarah Garcia Guzman impressed the audience with their focus and resilience, while San Cayetano Elementary's Paul Fontes and Raymundo Lopez showed remarkable confidence under pressure. Coatimundi Middle School was represented by Shulamithy Battu and Emmeline Demarest, whose performances would ultimately define the bee's final moments.

As the rounds grew more challenging, the room fell quieter. Every letter mattered, and every word carried weight. When the final word was spelled, the applause erupted loud, proud, and well-deserved. Rising to the top was Shulamithy Battu of Coatimundi Middle School, crowned this year's SCV35 District Spelling Bee Champion. Close behind was runner-up Emmeline Demarest, whose impressive performance kept the competition thrilling until the very end. Both students displayed extraordinary composure, intellect, and perseverance, earning admiration from peers and adults alike.



Yet the true triumph of the day extended far beyond trophies. Every student who stepped onto that stage represented their school with courage and pride. Each participant demonstrated that learning is not just about winning; it's about showing up prepared, pushing through nerves, and believing in one's abilities. Their efforts reminded everyone in attendance that academic excellence deserves the same spotlight as any athletic or artistic achievement.

The success of the Spelling Bee was made possible by a dedicated team of educators and leaders who understand the power of opportunity. Pronouncers John Fanning and Superintendent David Verdugo guided the competition with warmth and professionalism, while judges Mr. Dagoberto Lopez, Mr. Stephen Schadler, and Ms. Yemille Peiro ensured fairness and integrity throughout the event. Special recognition goes to Spelling Bee coordinator Ms. Judy Kennedy, whose leadership, organization, and commitment brought the entire event together seamlessly.



Monthly Roll Call

Beyond the Badge: Nogales PD Celebrates Its Heart, From K-9s to Community

The annual awards ceremony at the Nogales Police Department presents a formal celebration of excellence: plaques, handshakes, and proud smiles as Sergeant Gaston Ortega is named 2025 Officer of the Year and Fernanda Leyva is honored as the Professional Staff Member of the Year. However, to grasp the true story of this police force, one must look beyond the podium and observe the vibrant, everyday moments of service that characterize their year.

The real achievement is intricately woven into the community's fabric. It is evident in the eager faces of students at Wade Carpenter Middle School during Career Day, where officers not only discussed their jobs but also inspired young imaginations. It is also reflected in the camaraderie between a member of the Rio Rico Fire Department and the police, symbolizing the inter-agency unity that keeps the county safe.

The department's commitment is evident in the determined expressions of applicants enduring physical training alongside Corporal Calvillo and Sergeant Batriz, who are working to build a stronger force from the ground up. It is evident in the focused bond between K-9 Officer Castillo and his partner, Jack, a silent dialogue of trust that speaks volumes.

Additionally, it is found in the watchful presence of Officer Orozco, Corporal Acosta, and School Resource Officer Sanchez, who build connections with youth, transforming the perception of policing from a distant authority to an approachable mentorship.

At the center of this community tapestry are this year's honorees. Sergeant Ortega's leadership is undoubtedly reflected in these scenes of proactive engagement and dedication. Meanwhile, Staff Member of the Year Fernanda Leyva, an Evidence Technician, represents the indispensable yet often unseen backbone of the department. Her meticulous work ensures that the evidence gathered by officers in the field holds firm in the pursuit of justice, a crucial link in the chain that protects the community.

"These awards aren't about one brilliant moment," said Police Chief Roy Bermudez. "They represent the consistent, daily choice to serve with integrity, whether you're in a patrol car, a classroom, or the evidence room. Sgt. Ortega and Ms. Leyva exemplify that standard, and their work is mirrored in the commitment we see across our entire team."

Thus, while the awards highlight two standout names for 2025, the narrative they convey is collective. It is a story of a police department that measures its success not just by the number of calls answered, but by the futures inspired, partnerships forged, and a community strengthened by every individual's contribution from the K-9 unit to the Career Day volunteer to the expert behind the scenes.



Let's Talk Health

Is chocolate "healthy"?

Chocolate is a treat that contains compounds from cocoa, which may support health. However, many chocolate bars and candies are processed foods that include sugar, fat, and calories, which can diminish these health benefits.

Let's explore the differences between cacao, cocoa, and chocolate:

Cacao: This is the raw bean and is highest in flavanols, making it the least processed option.

Cocoa: This is cacao that has been roasted and ground. It remains rich in flavanols and is commonly used in baking.

Chocolate: A combination of cocoa, cocoa butter, sugar, and other ingredients. The more sugar and fat that are added, the less healthy the chocolate becomes.

Research shows that cocoa contains two notable compounds:

Flavanols: These antioxidants may help keep blood vessels flexible and healthy.

Theobromine: A mild stimulant that may help reduce inflammation.

Most evidence regarding these benefits comes from observational studies, which cannot prove cause and effect.

However, randomized controlled trials suggest potential health benefits.

If you enjoy chocolate, here are some tips to make healthier choices:

1. Choose darker chocolate: A higher cacao percentage means more flavanols and less sugar. Aim for chocolate with 70% cacao or higher if you enjoy the taste.
2. For hot chocolate: Use unsweetened 100% cocoa and sweeten it lightly to your preference.
3. Avoid white chocolate: It contains no cocoa solids, which means it has no flavanols.
4. Watch your portions: Enjoy chocolate in moderation.
5. Don't rely solely on chocolate for flavanols: You can get similar or even greater health benefits from other foods, such as:

- Black or green tea
- Apples
- Grapes
- Berries
- Cinnamon
- A variety of fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices



Remember, chocolate is just one of many flavanol-rich foods, and it may not be the most efficient source.

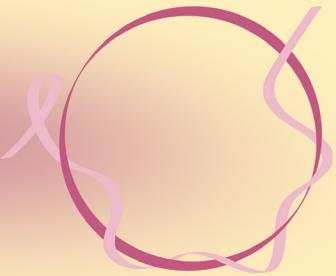


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**TEEN
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Sheriff's Round-Up



Over the past month, members of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office have proudly participated in several training sessions and community events, including:

- Jail & Prisoner Operations and Legal Issue Training
- Phlebotomy Training
- Career Fair at Rio Rico High School
- Homicide and Crime Scene Management Training

The Arizona Department of Public Safety awarded our Office \$444,628 for the Fiscal Year 2026. This includes funding for patrol vehicles, body-worn camera equipment, a hand-held narcotic analyzer, and for Interdiction and Jail Search operations.

Join Our Team

If you're interested in a rewarding career in law enforcement, we are currently accepting applications for the following positions:

- Deputy Sheriff
- Detention Officer
- Dispatcher

We are also actively recruiting Lateral Officers for Peace Officer, Detention Officer, and Dispatcher roles. Applications can be downloaded from the Santa Cruz County website and submitted to the Human Resources Office.

On behalf of myself and the entire administration, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all members of our communities who help maintain public safety every day.

Sincerely,
Sheriff David Hathaway



*A Message from the
Santa Cruz County Attorney*

FEBRUARY
Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month



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