

BORDER

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## CONNECTING SOUTHERN ARIZONA



STAR OF THE YEAR



EVENT OF THE YEAR



PERSON OF THE YEAR

SCAN ME



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Happy New Year 2026!



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*A Message from the Santa Cruz County School Superintendent*

**"The best way to predict the future is to create it."**

Happy  
New  
Year

2026



Maya Donnelly  
Santa Cruz County  
School Superintendent

&

Staff

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# Border Eco Updates

## Happy New Year from Border Eco Magazine!

As we bid farewell to the holiday season and welcome a brand new year, we want to take a moment to express our heartfelt gratitude to each and every one of you.

Your unwavering support, loyalty, and enthusiasm are the driving forces behind our mission to create engaging content that resonates with our community.

You are the reason we do what we do, and we're honored to have you as part of our Santa Cruz County family. Your encouragement and trust mean the world to us, and we're committed to continuing to provide high-quality content that showcases the remarkable individuals, noteworthy events, and influential organizations that make our community unique.

In the year ahead, we promise to remain dedicated to fostering connections, preserving our rich culture, and celebrating the cherished traditions that make our border town so special. We're excited to share more stories, ideas, and events that highlight the best of Santa Cruz County, and we're grateful to have you joining us on this journey.

Thank you for being a vital part of our community.

Here's to a bright, bold, and connected new year!

With deepest appreciation,

The Border Eco Magazine Team The Border Eco Team

Happy Holidays!



## SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

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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 Posada: Celebrating Families, Community, and Well-Being

In a heartwarming display of community spirit, the Los Padres Program recently gathered to celebrate its annual posada, a festive event that honors the journey of 50 families and 62 children who have benefited from the program's tireless efforts to support early childhood development and school readiness.

For years, the Los Padres Program has been a beacon of hope for families in Santa Cruz County, providing home visits, support for expectant mothers, and kindergarten preparation for children. This year's posada was a testament to the program's unwavering commitment to strengthening families from the earliest years, and the community's response was overwhelming.

"We are proud to support the Los Padres Program and its mission to empower families and inspire young minds," said Superintendent Maya M. Donnelly of the Santa Cruz County School Superintendent's Office. "The dedication and hard work of the program's educators and staff are truly making a difference in our community."

The celebration was made possible by the generous support of valued community partners, including the Boys & Girls Club, Giving Turtle (a program by Dora Taddei), South32, We Love Nogales, Mariposa Community Health Center, and Angels Charity. Their contributions have helped create a nurturing environment where children can thrive, and their presence at the posada underscored their commitment to the community.

"We are honored to partner with the Los Padres Program," said Germán Celaya of the Boys & Girls Club. "Together, we are building a stronger, more resilient community where every child has the opportunity to succeed." The graduation ceremony was a highlight of the event, with distinguished community leaders in attendance to celebrate the achievements of the program's graduates. Among them were Francisco Padilla, Regional Director of First Things First; Rachel Noriega of Mariposa Community Health Center; John Fanning, County Supervisor for District 3; and Judge Miguel A. López, who praised the program's dedication to early childhood development.

"The Los Padres Program is a shining example of what can be accomplished when community leaders, educators, and families come together to support our youngest citizens," said Judge López. "I am honored to be a part of this celebration and look forward to seeing the incredible things these children will accomplish."

The program's educators were also recognized for their tireless efforts, including Melissa Gallegos, Arianna Canez, Yessenia Prado, Erika Mezquita, and Celia Sandoval. Their dedication and passion have made a tangible difference in the lives of the families they serve.

As the Los Padres Program looks to the future, it remains committed to its mission of supporting families and inspiring young minds. The program's success is a testament to the power of community and the importance of investing in early childhood development.

"We are grateful for the support of our community partners and the dedication of our educators," said a spokesperson for the Los Padres Program. "Together, we are creating a brighter future for our children and our community."

As the holiday season approaches, the Los Padres Program extends its warmest wishes to all families and partners. May your Christmas be joyful and your 2026 be filled with hope, promise, and the promise of young minds. The Los Padres Program is a shining example of community spirit and dedication to early childhood development. Its annual posada is a celebration of the program's achievements and a testament to the power of community support. As the program looks to the future, it remains committed to its mission of strengthening families and inspiring young minds.





# Delivering Smiles 2025: A Season of Kindness and Connection

In a heartwarming display of community spirit, the Bowman Senior Center was filled with laughter and joy as volunteers and sponsors gathered to distribute “Care Boxes” to local seniors. The Delivering Smiles Campaign 2025 has become a beloved tradition in Santa Cruz County, and this year’s event continued to capture the true meaning of the season. Held on Thursday, December 11th, the community came together with one goal to bring joy, comfort, and companionship to seniors who might otherwise spend the holidays alone. Through the combined efforts of volunteers, sponsors, and local organizations, that goal was met with overwhelming success.

At the heart of Delivering Smiles were the volunteers, organizations, students, and professionals who gave their time to ensure that every senior received a beautifully packaged Care Box. Each box was filled with gloves, scarves, socks, blankets, and treats, but what it truly carried was the spirit of compassion and connection. Days before the event, youth from the NHS Community Club and Arizona@Work joined Nogales Housing Authority staff to pack and label boxes. Their energy and laughter made the experience joyful and inspiring. “It’s not just about what’s inside the box,” said volunteer Roxanna Lopez. “It’s about what it represents our way of saying, ‘We see you, we care about you, and you matter.’”

The staff of the Housing Authority, long-time supporters of the campaign, once again went above and beyond by coordinating deliveries, visiting residents, and ensuring that no senior was left behind. Their dedication has transformed this event into a cherished annual tradition that seniors eagerly anticipate each year. This year’s success was made possible through the generosity of community sponsors, including Cropper’s Auto Center, South 32, Borderlands Food Bank, Safeway, City of Nogales, Nogales Housing Authority, Arizona@Work, NHS Community Club, Santa Cruz Democratic Party, NCD, Elect Gabaldon for Senate, Stewart Title, Indivisible, and Making Connections 4U. Their contributions, whether financial, logistical, or hands-on, helped ensure that every Care Box was filled and every heart was touched.

Equally inspiring were sponsors and individual supporters, including Sonia Sanchez, Sandra Moraga, Karl and Kalani Krause, Yolanda Soto, Mary Darling, Arnold Avila, Zaida Bustamante, Clarissa Gastelum, Judith Mendoza, Roxana Fragoso, and Theresa Astrain, who generously donated their time and resources. “This event embodies what the holidays are truly about, which is community, kindness, and joy,” said Sonia Sanchez, a longtime volunteer. “When we come together to make others feel valued and remembered, that’s when the magic of Christmas truly comes alive.”

The event also highlighted the strength of collaboration. Borderlands Food Bank, led by Yolanda Soto, provided food and essentials for the Care Boxes, while Safeway and South 32 added festive touches. Arizona@Work and local students demonstrated the power of youth engagement, gaining firsthand experience in the joy of service. As volunteers delivered Care Boxes to homebound seniors, it became clear this effort was about more than gifts. It was about connection. Some recipients shared stories, others expressed gratitude, and many simply smiled through tears. “When you visit someone who hasn’t had company in weeks and see their face light up, it changes you,” shared one volunteer.

The Delivering Smiles Campaign 2025 was more than an event. It was a movement of compassion and community. In a world that can sometimes feel divided, it reminded everyone of what truly unites us: empathy, generosity, and love for our neighbors. As the final boxes were delivered and hugs exchanged, the room filled with warmth and a sense of gratitude. Seniors embraced volunteers, thanking them for remembering them during the holidays. “You’ve shown the true spirit of Christmas, community, kindness, and joy,” said organizers.

**Ultimately, Delivering Smiles did more than deliver boxes; it delivered hope, connection, and the reminder that when a community comes together, hearts open and lives are brightened well beyond the holiday season.**



# YEAR IN REVIEW

## Event of the Year

**A Community's Promise Fulfilled: Santa Cruz Hosts Historic "People's Swearing-In" for Congresswoman Adelita S. Grijalva**

The event of the year in Santa Cruz County was not a festival or a fair, but a profound civic ceremony that rewrote the political landscape. On December 5th, the county auditorium transformed into a vibrant chamber of democracy for "The People's Swearing-In" of Congresswoman Adelita S. Grijalva, the first Latina ever to represent Arizona in Congress. This was deliberately more than a procedural formality; it was a joyous, resonant celebration built by and for the community that elected her. Following her September special election victory and a seven-week delay, the gathering marked the historic culmination of a long-awaited milestone, bringing the significance of her office directly home. Amidst the stirring chords of NMS Mariachi and chants of "¡Adelante!", the event pulsed with a powerful message: this achievement belonged not to a distant capital, but to the families, students, and local leaders of Santa Cruz County who saw their diversity and strength reflected in a history-making representative.

The impact of this community-chosen ceremony was both immediate and profound, creating a strong new bond between representatives and their constituents. The event featured a heartfelt, community-crafted banner proclaiming "The People's Swearing-In," which symbolized a grassroots connection that extended beyond mere symbolism into genuine engagement. After the ceremonial oath, a dynamic forum was held to ensure that the spirit of the event continued to inspire meaningful action moving forward. Residents engaged directly with Congresswoman Grijalva, listening to her vision for border community infrastructure and educational equity while expressing their own hopes and needs. This reciprocal dialogue captured the essence of the day: her seat in Congress would serve as a conduit for the voices that helped her get there. As the celebrations came to a close, what remained was a profound sense of collective ownership and optimism. By choosing to begin her service in the communities of Nogales and Santa Cruz County, where her journey started, Congresswoman Grijalva ensured that as she steps onto the national stage, she carries with her the unmistakable spirit of her home, serving as a constant reminder of the people whose faith made history possible.

Congresswoman Adelita S. Grijalva and community leaders from Santa Cruz County



## Organization of the Year

**A Beacon of Empowerment: The Santa Cruz County Justice Project, Our Organization of the Year**

The Santa Cruz County Justice Project emerges not merely as a new nonprofit but as a community-forged answer to a profound and urgent need, earning its place as the organization of the year. Born from the simple, powerful observation that too many face the legal system alone and intimidated, it represents a visionary shift toward making justice accessible, approachable, and equitable. Under the leadership of Miguel Lopez and Executive Director Martha L. Barrón, the project has transformed a personal desire into a community-driven blueprint for a legal hub where dignity, clarity, and equity are tangible realities, not abstract ideals. Even before its doors open, its meticulously crafted mission, a blend of bilingual self-help clinics, a pioneering Community Legal Advocate training program with the University of Arizona, and innovative tech tools like interactive legal guides, signals a transformative approach designed to dismantle barriers of language, fear, and financial hardship that have long plagued the region.

The impact of this initiative on our community will be both immediate and lasting, extending across generations. By targeting the most destabilizing legal crises, eviction and domestic violence, with culturally grounded, immediate support, the Project will act as a critical lifeline, preserving family stability and safety. Its innovative model of training local residents as guides empowers the community from within, creating a sustainable network of trust and knowledge. Furthermore, by meticulously tracking outcomes and weaving community feedback into its core operations through partnerships with groups like Mariposa Health and local courts, the Project ensures it evolves as a responsive pillar of support. Looking ahead, its vision to shape policy on advocacy and accessible justice promises to amplify Santa Cruz County's voice on a larger stage. Ultimately, the Santa Cruz County Justice Project stands as a powerful testament to a community reclaiming the law, transforming it from a daunting barrier into a tool for empowerment and a foundation for a more just and secure future for all.

Santa Cruz County Justice Project





# YEAR IN REVIEW

Monica Gonzalez, Associate Director for the Amado, Green Valley, and Nogales Resource Centers

## Person of the Year

### The Heart of Southern Arizona: Monica Gonzalez is Our Person of the Year

For nine years, Monica Gonzalez has been the quiet, steady force ensuring that no table in Southern Arizona goes empty. From her roots in California's labor fields to her leadership as Associate Director of the Community Food Bank's Amado, Green Valley, and Nogales resource centers, Monica has woven her lived experience directly into the fabric of public service. Her journey from client services to regional leadership has given her a holistic vision: that combating hunger is about far more than distributing meals. It is about distributing dignity. In rural communities like Amado, where her center serves as a lifeline for over 150 families, Monica has transformed a food distribution site into a hub of hope. Under her guidance, the process is efficient and respectful, but her true impact is measured in the trust she builds and the empowerment she fosters—proving that public service, at its best, doesn't just meet needs; it nurtures possibility.

Monica's impact resonates through the volunteers she inspires, the innovative programs she champions, and the palpable sense of community she cultivates. She recognizes that staff and volunteers are the backbone of the operation, and her leadership empowers them to serve with compassion and dedication. Looking ahead, Monica is already shaping the future of community support, passionately exploring ideas such as local farmers' markets and workshops on entrepreneurship and financial literacy. These initiatives aim to equip residents with skills for long-term stability, moving beyond emergency aid toward sustainable empowerment. In the face of looming SNAP cuts, her work becomes even more critical, and her partnerships with local organizations amplify a collective safety net for Southern Arizona. As the Community Food Bank enters a new chapter, Monica Gonzalez stands as a testament to how one person's dedication, rooted in empathy, driven by innovation, and committed to justice, can truly transform a region, making her not just a leader but our Person of the Year.



Blanca Acosta, Executive Director of Constructing Circles of Peace

## Rising Star of the Year

### Building Bridges to Healing: Blanca Acosta is Our Rising Star of the Year

In the landscape of behavioral health, where systems can feel impersonal and clinical, Blanca Acosta stands as a transformative force, weaving threads of culture, compassion, and community into a powerful tapestry of healing. As the Executive Director of Constructing Circles of Peace, her two decades of dedication have fundamentally reshaped how Santa Cruz County approaches wellness and justice. Blanca didn't just enter the field; she revolutionized it from within, moving beyond traditional punitive models to pioneer restorative justice programs that address the root causes of trauma and conflict. Her leadership was instrumental in creating the county's first Pretrial Services Program and Drug Recovery Court, innovative initiatives that replace cycles of incarceration with pathways to rehabilitation, demonstrating that true behavioral health intervention must foster accountability through support, not solely through punishment.

Blanca's impact is significant because her work is deeply rooted in the community she serves. As a certified Community Health Worker and Domestic Violence Facilitator, she advocates for culturally relevant programs that honor the lived experiences of those she helps. From her early days as a Circle Keeper to her current role as a visionary leader, Blanca has focused on building resilience among individuals and within the community as a whole. Her forward-thinking vision includes intergenerational wellness programs for seniors, ensuring that behavioral health support evolves to meet the needs of all age groups. Inspired by her mentor, Judge Mary Helen Maley, Blanca Acosta demonstrates that profound healing occurs through connections with others. She is not merely providing services; she is thoughtfully creating a legacy of empathy, showing that small, passionate actions can lead to monumental and lasting change.







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# A Legacy of Service: Nidia Solorzano Marks 20 Years of Empowering Survivors of Domestic Violence

In a remarkable testament to her dedication and passion, Nidia Solorzano recently celebrated a milestone 20-year anniversary with the Santa Cruz County Attorney's Office. Her remarkable journey in the field of domestic violence advocacy is a shining example of the impact one person can have in creating positive change in their community. Solorzano's path was far from predetermined. Growing up, she knew she wanted to help people, but it wasn't until she began volunteering at SEABHS, a local organization supporting individuals in need, that she discovered her true calling. "I was unaware of the reality of domestic violence," she recalls, "but I knew I wanted to make a difference."

Over the years, Solorzano has witnessed significant progress in the way communities respond to domestic violence. "The laws haven't changed much, but there are more resources available," she notes. "We have more support for those affected, programs for education and prevention, and a growing understanding of the issue." Despite the challenges, Solorzano remains committed to her work, inspired by the resilience and strength of the individuals she serves. "My greatest challenge is ensuring safety and respect for those affected," she says. "But I believe that every small step counts, and I'm proud to be part of a community that is working together to address this issue."

**George Silva, County Attorney & Nidia Solorzano**

Under the leadership of George Silva, County Attorney, the Santa Cruz County Attorney's Office has created a supportive work environment that allows employees like Solorzano to thrive. "I'm grateful to work in an environment where I feel valued and supported," Solorzano says. "It's a testament to the leadership and commitment of our office." As Solorzano reflects on her two decades of service, she remains hopeful for a future where individuals can live safely and freely. "My greatest wish is that families can live in safe homes, free from violence," she says. "That being informed and seeking help makes a difference."



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# Rio Rico Insights

## A Busload of Kindness: SCV35 Celebrates 5th Annual Stuff the Bus Event

The Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District No. 35 (SCV35) celebrated a successful 5th Annual Stuff the Bus event thanks to the generosity and strong community support shown throughout the day. The event collected more than 580 donations, including toys, sports equipment, and four bicycles, all of which will help brighten the holiday season for students across the district.

The event featured performances by the Rio Rico High School HawX Dance Team, Mountain View Elementary Cheerleaders, and the Rio Rico High School Jazz Band, creating an energetic and family-friendly atmosphere. Student organizations played a key role in the event's success, with San Cayetano and Mountain View STUCO assisting with donation collection, while the RRHS Interact Club and JROTC helped promote the event throughout the community.

District principals and parent liaisons were also in attendance, offering support and helping engage families during the event. Adding to the excitement, the mascots for Rio Rico High School, Rico and Rita, made a special appearance to cheer on attendees and volunteers. SCV35 also recognized community partner Walmart for its continued support of district initiatives and commitment to giving back to local families. The event received additional community attention when local radio station OVI 99.1 stopped by to conduct an on-air interview and help promote the cause.

"The success of Stuff the Bus truly reflects the heart of our community," said Audra Bilow, Communications and Community Outreach Specialist for SCV35. "Seeing students, staff, families, and community partners come together to support our children is incredibly meaningful, and we are deeply grateful for the generosity shown year after year."

Through events like Stuff the Bus, SCV35 continues to strengthen community partnerships while supporting students and families throughout the district.





# Monthly Roll Call

## Holiday Message from the Chief of Police

As we enter this holiday season, I would like to take a moment to express my gratitude to our community for your continued trust, support, and partnership throughout the year.

The holidays are a time for reflection, gratitude, and togetherness. They remind us of the values that unite us—kindness, compassion, and looking out for one another. Those same values guide the men and women of this department every day as they work to keep our neighborhoods safe.

During the holidays, we take time to reflect, feel gratitude, and come together. This season highlights the shared values that bring us closer together: kindness, compassion, and a commitment to look out for our neighbors. These are the very values that drive the dedicated men and women of our police department as they work daily to ensure the safety of our neighborhoods.

While many gather with family and friends, our officers and professional staff will remain on duty, committed to serving and protecting the community we are proud to call home. We ask everyone to celebrate responsibly, look out for your neighbors, and take a moment to check on those who may need assistance during this season.

**On behalf of the entire Nogales Police Department, I wish you and your loved ones a safe, peaceful, and joyful holiday season, and a healthy and prosperous New Year.**

**Carlos L. Jimenez**  
Chief of Police



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# LET'S TALK HEALTH



## It's January 2026 — What Are Your New Year's Resolutions?

Many of us start the new year with a long list of things we hope to change. But New Year's resolutions can often feel overrated and overwhelming. In fact, they can carry risks: a high failure rate that leads to stress, anxiety, guilt, and even a damaged self-image.

Many resolutions are driven by external pressures rather than personal values, and they often set unrealistic expectations or promote an all-or-nothing mindset that discourages meaningful, lasting change.

A frequently cited 1988 study of 200 people found that while 77% stuck with their resolutions after one week, only 43% were still on track at three months — and just 19% maintained them after two years.

Another study showed that only 46% of people felt successful with their resolutions six months in. So why is that?

One major reason is that many resolutions are simply unrealistic. Take eating habits, for example. Making big, sweeping changes all at once is difficult. But shifting toward healthier behaviors is possible — especially when we simplify our goals.

A helpful approach is the SMART framework, which stands for:

Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-based.

Instead of broad goals like “eat healthier,” try making one small, specific change such as:

- Adding vegetables to fill half your plate at meals each day, or
- Eating one piece of fruit daily.

Once that habit feels comfortable, you can build on it. And remember — surrounding yourself with supportive people can make all the difference.

Behavior change is challenging, but don't be discouraged if you don't meet your goals perfectly at first. Progress isn't linear. Keep going, keep adjusting, and keep giving yourself grace.

Wishing you a Happy New Year!

Badria Bedri, MS

Nutritionist, Mariposa Community Health Center



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Happy New Year!

*"May the blessings of the upcoming New Year fill your heart and home with joy."*

2026



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# Sheriff's Round-Up



The Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office is buzzing with activity, and we're excited to share some highlights from the past month. Our deputies and staff have been hard at work, participating in crucial training sessions and community events that make a real difference in our community.

One of the standout events was a 24-hour course focused on impaired drivers, where our officers honed their skills in detecting and handling DUI cases. This training is crucial in keeping our roads safe and preventing accidents.

But it's not all work and no play! Our team also had a blast participating in the Rio Rico Christmas lighting event, spreading holiday cheer and getting to know the community they serve.

At the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office, we're committed to building strong relationships with our community, and we're always looking for passionate individuals to join our team. If you're interested in a rewarding career in law enforcement, we have exciting opportunities available:

- Deputy Sheriff
- Detention Officer
- Dispatcher

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. We can't wait to meet our next team members!



In closing, Sheriff David Hathaway extends his heartfelt appreciation to the community for their continued support. "On behalf of myself and the entire administration, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all members of our communities that assist us to maintain public safety every day," he said. We're proud to serve, and we're grateful for the opportunity to make a difference.

Happy New Year!  
Sheriff David Hathaway







A message from the Santa Cruz County Attorney

*"The best time for new beginnings is now."*



*Happy New Year*



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