2020: A difficult year that showcased Menlo Park’s resilience

By Kate Bradshaw
Almanac Staff Writer

In many ways, 2020 was a year made infamous by its relentless awfulness. It threw at us a global pandemic and widespread economic devastation, new police killings of unarmed Black people and some of the largest wildfires ever recorded in the Western U.S. People struggled to adapt to new routines wrought by unprecedented shelter-in-place orders enacted in mid-March and lasting months, learning how to work, study, play and grow, one homebound day at a time — all while a highly infectious new virus sickened and killed people at alarming rates, hitting seniors, essential frontline workers and communities of color especially hard.

The year especially highlighted the region’s deep inequalities. While some local families abscended to less restrictive areas to avoid the inconveniences of shelter-in-place orders, others have been forced to live with painful uncertainties in addition to the grueling ones everyone else faced. They asked themselves questions like: When can I work again? How will my family pay rent? Will we be evicted? What will we eat?

Winter

In the first quarter of 2020, we saw the world turn upside down from the pandemic — and experienced California’s first March primary. The biggest local election was among seven candidates seeking to replace state Sen. Jerry Hill when he termed out of the Legislature in 2020. The top two vote-getters in March were Democrat Josh Becker and Republican Alex Glew. Becker won handily in the November general election.

By mid-March, the coronavirus pandemic was raging and shelter-in-place orders put into effect as public health agencies scrambled to learn more about the virus, develop tests and contact tracing capacity and ensure adequate hospital space by “flattening the curve” of the virus’ growing spread.

Both the city of Menlo Park and the county of San Mateo expanded emergency powers and used those powers in new ways. The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors enacted temporary eviction moratoriums to protect residential and commercial tenants during the initial shutdowns. The supervisors poured funds into programs intended to help those struggling: local small businesses, immigrant families who were not eligible for federal support, child care facilities, and the unhoused and marginally housed.

COVID-19 forced just about everyone to change how they do things. We reported on how the coronavirus is reshaping how people mourn, how seniors cope with increasing isolation, and how the pandemic creates conditions that could worsen the abuse that could worsen the abuse that could worsen the abuse that could worsen the abuse that could worsen the abuse that could worsen the abuse.

See MENLO PARK 2020, page 18

Costs staggering to reopen local schools amid pandemic

By Angela Swartz
Almanac Staff Writer

It costs a lot to reopen a school during a pandemic. Local elementary school districts have reported spending hundreds of thousands of dollars — even millions — to safely bring students back to campuses.

It cost nearly $1 million to reopen Portola Valley School District classrooms this fall. The bulk of the money — over $580,000 — went toward staffing increases. The two-school, 495-student district hired three additional teachers to meet the required small cohorts needed for on-campus learning and to offer a virtual academy option to families who are not comfortable returning for on-campus learning, said Connie Ngo, the district’s chief business official, in an email. The district also contracted with three substitute teachers instead of hiring day-to-day subs as in past years, to avoid substitutes mixing in with other communities, she said. The district hired an additional instructional aide, and the school nurse increased from working just one day a week to three.

More than $118,000 went into health and safety measures: sanitation supplies, masks, gloves, face shields, HVAC air filters, hand-washing stations, tents, thermometers and other supplies, said Ngo. Curriculum costs totaled about $33,000 for online curriculum, student supplies and to use Edgenuity, a K-12 online platform for virtual learning.

Nearly $73,000 went into technology costs like new devices and Chromebooks for students, hot spots for families, additional teaching software and Zoom upgrades.

The district received about $300,000 from local, state and federal sources to cover COVID-related costs. Of that, the Portola Valley Parent-Teacher Organization and Portola Valley Foundation covered about $115,000 of the additional costs, according to the district.

The Woodside Elementary School District, which has 372 students, saved close to $1 million in expenses last spring while students were distance learning, according to Superintendent Steve Frank. But this fall it has taken on half a million dollars in costs for new COVID-related safety precautions, which include the administrative costs of testing staff members weekly, HEPA air filter installations, building outdoor classrooms and hiring additional substitute teachers to oversee more fragmented student groups.

The school also installed 50 hand sanitizer stations and four portable outdoor hand-washing sinks.

The district received $180,000 in Child Care Relief Fund grant funds from San Mateo County to help county schools that have been adversely impacted by COVID, Frank said.

Despite the costs, school officials have accomplished their...
I am impressed with your staff reporting the local news exactly as it happens without a biased agenda. As a senior citizen, I have seen journalism degenerate to becoming a platform for the personal biases of the writer and presented in that way ... I will stick with you.

- Ann S.

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In the midst of unprecedented usage of the word “unprecedented,” the 140 agents in the Silicon Valley and Peninsula offices of Golden Gate Sotheby’s International Realty were better than ever at making dreams come true, closing a record-setting 904 transactions totaling $2.2 billion dollars.

If they can do that in a year like this last one, imagine what could happen in 2021.
May 2021 bring good health, happiness and a renewed spirit.

With gratitude for your support from all of us at The Almanac, Mountain View Voice, and Palo Alto Weekly.
Two Menlo firefighters among first in county to receive COVID vaccine

By Angela Swartz
Almanac Staff Writer

Two firefighters were among the first in San Mateo County to receive one of the COVID-19 vaccines last week.

They were part of a group of six firefighters and paramedics who volunteered to staff a two-person Pandemic Emergency Response Unit for the Menlo Park Fire Protection District, which serves Menlo Park, Atherton, East Palo Alto and surrounding unincorporated communities, according to a Dec. 24 district press release. The team was equipped with an upgraded level of personal protective equipment and protocols to respond to possible COVID-19 medical incidents.

“Having our six personnel who volunteered to put themselves at a higher risk in order to protect others, when we knew so little, was an important moment that showed our courage, compassion and leadership,” said fire Chief Harold Schapelhouman. “That’s why we put them at the front of the line of our front-line fire personnel to be vaccinated, if they wanted to do this, and trust me, everyone in our organization gets it and appreciated it.”

Over the last nine months, nearly half of the district’s 100 first responders have been tested and/or quarantined due to possible exposure to the virus. Two firefighters contracted the virus and both survived, according to the press release.

The pandemic team responded to care facilities, homeless encampments and cramped housing conditions, where entire families tested positive for the virus, to car accidents, suicides, stabbings, overdoses and difficulty breathing calls in which the patients’ actual conditions were less known. Some 10% of the medical responses over the last nine months were flagged as patients among first in county to receive COVID vaccine.

See FIREFIGHTERS, page 15

A rough year as local schools weather a pandemic

Remote learning, drops in enrollment among 2020’s challenges

By Angela Swartz
Almanac Staff Writer

It was a school year unlike any other for students and teachers on the Midpeninsula. Students were sent home to learn in March when schools were forced to close for in-person instruction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Traditions were reinvented. The class of 2020 accepted their diplomas via car parades and drive-in graduation ceremonies.

Proms were canceled, and so were sports seasons.

By the fall, some students in the Las Lomitas Elementary, Woodside Elementary, Portola Valley and Menlo Park City school districts, along with some private schools, returned to campuses for class. They faced social distancing measures, mask-wearing mandates, COVID-19 testing and quarantines when students or staff members in their cohorts tested positive. So far, few cases have been reported in these districts. Other students continued with online learning and may do so for the remainder of the school year.

There were mixed feelings about going back to school. Teachers expressed fears about the risks of contract- ing COVID-19 by returning

See SCHOOLS 2020, page 14

Portola Valley examines its history while looking toward the future

By Julia Brown
Almanac Assistant Editor

While 2020 will always be remembered as the year marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, in Portola Valley it was also a period of self-examination, adaptation and looking toward the future.

The town banded together to help senior residents isolated due to the stay-at-home orders, as Roberts Market began offering curbside pickup service.

 UPS driver Lew Hess speaks to the crowd of Portola Valley residents who have come to thank him for his decades of work in the town on July 31.

Portola Valley examines its history while looking toward the future

YEAR IN REVIEW

The year marked by COVID-19 by returning

See PORTOLA VALLEY 2020, page 16
Atherton bids adieu to train service, nears completion of new civic center

By Angela Swartz
Almanac Staff Writer

A therton made progress on construction of its long-awaited $31.6 million civic center project in 2020 despite a brief shutdown in March because of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. There were also changes in leadership, the closure of the town’s historic train station, license plate reader installations and the possible return of burglaries from two years ago. It, like every other nearby town, had to adjust to holding its government meetings virtually, on Zoom.

In July or August 2021, the town will begin transitioning the police department and other employees into the administrative building because construction workers need to demolish what is left of the police department building to complete the project, said City Manager George Rodericks in a Dec. 22 email. The official opening is slated for October 2021, he said.

The town broke ground on the new facilities, which include a police department building to demolish what is left of the administrative building because construction workers need to demolish what is left of the police department building to complete the project, said City Manager George Rodericks in a Dec. 22 email. The official opening is slated for October 2021, he said.

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Trains shut down

The final train stopped in Atherton on the evening of Dec. 13 after Caltrain opted to discontinue service in town. The rail line’s officials said the closure would allow it to add service to the nearby Menlo Park and Redwood City stations, which have much higher ridership and where denser developments are projected to generate higher levels of future demand for public transit.

The council agreed to shut down the more than 150-year-old station at the end of October because of years of low ridership and a desire to safeguard the town from future legislation similar to Senate Bill 50, which would have required cities to allow high-density housing development near public transit.

Fire district controversy and leadership changes

Cary Wiest was unseated from the council by newcomer Diana Hawkins-Manuelian in the November election. Councilman Rick DeGolia, who served as mayor in 2020, endorsed Hawkins-Manuelian, saying he couldn’t back Wiest since Wiest supported separating the town from the Menlo Park Fire Protection District (a claim Wiest denies). Hawkins-Manuelian opposed detachment.

Town officials have been exploring the possibility of detaching from the fire district since a review, commissioned by the town and released in 2018, found that Atherton taxpayers pay more than twice as much as fire services cost, paying about $7 million more annually. The study shows that in the 2015-16 fiscal year Atherton, which has 8% of the residents in the fire district, provided 31.7% of the district’s total property tax revenues.

On Dec. 16, the council elected Elizabeth Lewis as mayor and Mike Lempres as vice mayor to serve during 2021. Mona Ebrahimi became city attorney, replacing Bill Conners, who was appointed to his position in 2011. Conners retired in January 2020. He worked alongside his daughter, assistant town attorney Jennifer Conners Larson, who specializes in litigation.

Burglaries

In December, police said that they believe criminals responsible for residential burglaries in town from November 2018 to February 2019 are responsible for a recent spate of break-ins in town.

The 2020 crimes include the theft $800,000 worth of jewelry, which included Rose Bowl watches, from a home on Dec. 8. During the previous string of burglaries, millions of dollars of items were stolen in 20 residential burglaries over a four-month period.

In 2020, the town installed 21 license plate readers to help deter crime in an attempt to capture criminals coming or going from burglaries. The cameras were first proposed as a response to the 2018-19 burglary spree. DeGolia said one of these readers captured a vehicle involved in the Dec. 8 burglary.

Automated license plate readers (ALPRs) are mounted on police cars or on fixtures such as road signs and bridges. There were already public safety cameras at Holbrook-Palmer Park, and new police vehicles are equipped with ALPR cameras as part of their existing dashboard cameras.

Recology dumped

In September, Atherton ditched its longstanding garbage and recycling pickup service provider to reduce garbage rates, with Councilman Bill Widmer recusing himself from the vote. The council chose to employ the services of GreenWaste Recovery Services instead. A town staff report notes that Greenwaste Recovery offers more fiscally predictable services.

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Coronavirus central: State makes deal to get vaccines to nursing homes
Regional stay-at-home orders unlikely to end soon

By Embarcadero Media staff

S
an Mateo County reported 23,916 cumulative COVID-19 cases as of Monday. Five more people have died, raising the death toll to 217. There were 154 people hospital-
ized. Santa Clara County as of Monday had 66,270 total cases. The seven-day rolling average of new cases per day ended Dec. 20 is 2,541. The death toll stands at 652. In addition, 669 people were hos-
pitalized with the virus, 110 of which were new.

COVID-19 spread likely to worsen due to holiday gatherings

The coronavirus’ spread in California is likely to pick up this week as people gather for holidays like Christmas and then hold gatherings to cele-
bate the new year, the state’s Health and Human Services secretary said Tuesday.

The virus’ nature of incubating for up to two weeks, social gatherings during the past week of 2020 are likely to exacerbate the state’s already struggling health care system in the coming weeks, according to HHS Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly.

The Bay Area still has 10.4% of its intensive care unit beds available, according to Ghaly, but other parts of the state like Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley have virtu-
ally no ICU beds left for additional coronavirus patients, due in part to gatherings for the week.

“The celebrations that are planned, we hope some are canceled, some are done dif-
ferently, so that we can main-
tain and bring down this spread, but we know and expect that some (gatherings) will happen,” Ghaly said Tuesday during a briefing on the pandemic.

State and local public health officials have encouraged and even pleaded this month with state residents to avoid gath-
ering with people from other households while new cases of the coronavirus multiply in much of California.

Limiting holiday gatherings will be especially crucial, Ghaly said, as moving regions out of the state’s stay-at-home order, which is enforced for a mini-
um of three weeks in regions of the state with less than 1% ICU capacity.

The 11-county greater Bay Area would be eligible to leave the stay-at-home order Jan. 8 if its ICU capacity crossed that 10% threshold.

Ghaly said Tuesday that the Southern California and San

Joaquin Valley regions would have their stay-at-home orders extended beyond the three-
week minimum.

“Christmas gathering and infection becomes amplified, a bit more exponential, over the New Year’s celebrations and we could see the worst of it in early January,” Ghaly said.

State partners with drugstores

CVS and Walgreens will provide vaccine doses from the pharmaceutical company Pfizer to residents and staff members in facilities like nurr-
ing homes and assisted living centers.

According to Newsom, CVS will provide vaccines to around 500 nursing homes, while Wal-
greens will do so at roughly 350 nursing homes over the next three to four weeks.

By leveraging CVS and Walgreens resources, we can effectively deploy vaccines to residents and staff at our long-
term care facilities, which are at higher risk of COVID transmission — and do it at no cost to the state or local government,” Newsom said in a statement.

Residents and staff members in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities are among the first in the state to receive the vaccine along with front-line health care workers, in-home health care work-
ners, primary care clinic work-
ers, laboratory workers, dental clinic employees and pharmacy staff.

People over age 75 or age 65 if they have underlying health conditions, workers in educa-
tion and child care, emergency services, food and agriculture, transportation and logistics, manufacturing and the indus-
trial, residential and commer-
cial sectors are all expected to begin receiving the vaccine in January on the current schedule.

In addition, unhoused resi-
dents and people in the state’s prison system will be among the next pool of people with access to the vaccine.

Stay-at-home orders face likely extension

Stay-at-home orders currently in effect in the Bay Area and three other California regions likely will remain in place past the minimum three-
week duration, state officials affirmed last Friday.

The state’s stay-at-home order is triggered when a region’s average intensive care unit capacity falls below 15%. The Bay Area, greater Sacra-
mento, the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California are under the order.

The state department’s predic-
tion was in line with a Dec. 21 announcement from Gov. Gavin Newsom. The governor said at that time that skyrock-
eting COVID-19 cases and hospi-
talizations would probably keep the stay-at-home orders in effect for multiple regions across the state.

Eshoo receives COVID-19 vaccine

Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, rolled up her sleeve to receive a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine Dec. 23, a moment the congresswoman shared in a tweet. “As more vaccines are shipped out, I encourage everyone to get vaccinated,” she said.

“We have to protect ourselves & others against this deadly virus.”

Eshoo was vaccinated at the recommendation of the Office of the Attending Physician. She was able to end her self-quarantine that day after consulting with the office. Eshoo had been staying in her Washington, D.C., home as a precaution after learning a member of her staff tested positive for COVID-19 on Dec. 16.

See CORONAVIRUS, page 15

Menlo Park briefs

By Kate Bradshaw

Holiday tree pickups

With Christmas over, Recology will begin collecting trees between Jan. 1 and 31. People should remove all tinsel, lights, decorations and stands, and then place the tree next to their green compost bins on the regular collection day.

People living in single-family homes should make sure trees are no taller than 8 feet. Trees larger than that should be cut into lengths of 8 feet or less.

After Jan. 31, people will be required to cut up and put the trees inside the compost bin.

Apartment managers should call Recology San Mateo County at 650-595-3900 to arrange for holiday trees to be collected.

Minimum wage to rise

Effective Jan. 1, the mini-
um wage for workers in Menlo Park is $15.25 per hour, up from the $15 established in 2020. The minimum wage rises in accordance with the inflation rate, but is capped at 3%. Between August 2019 and 2020, there was a 1.6% increase in the San Francisco Bay Area, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The minimum wage applies to all employers within Menlo Park city boundaries and to employees working at least two hours each week.

People may report a sus-
pected violation through the City Manager’s Office at 650-330-6610.

Email Kate Bradshaw at kbradshaw@almanacnews.com

OBITUARY

Local residents who died recently include Anne Creevy, 85, a longtime edu-
cator at Ormondale School in Portola Valley, on Sept. 27.

To read full obituaries, take in memoriam ads and post photos, go to Lasting Memories at almanacnews.com/obituaries.

CRIME BRIEFS

Person rescued from Woodside house fire

One person was rescued in a house fire on Sky-
line Boulevard in Woodside early Sunday morn-
ing, according to Cal Fire.

The fire was reported around 1 a.m. Dec. 27 at a two-story home in the 13000 block of Skyline Boulevard near County Road, according to Cal Fire spokesperson Cecile Juliette.

The blaze was reported by a tenant who lived in an attached unit to the main residence, Juliette said.

Crews found the first floor filled with smoke and set up a ladder to rescue a resident in their 60s, according to Juliette. The person was unable to evacuate due to the amount of smoke and flames in the home.

The person was taken by ambulance to a hos-
pital with moderate injuries, she said. No other injuries were reported.

Before 2 a.m., crews knocked down the blaze and stopped it from extending to nearby vegetation, according to Cal Fire.

The home was deemed uninhabitable as a result of the fire, Juliette said. The cause is under investi-
gation and a damage estimate wasn’t immediately available on Sunday morning. Additional infor-
mation was unavailable as of Monday evening.

Firefighters were on scene for roughly three hours and 15 minutes, according to PulsePoint, a appli-
cation that tracks emergency.

The Kings Mountain Fire Department, Wood-
side Fire Protection District, San Mateo County Fire Department and San Mateo County Sheriff’s Office also responded to the incident, according to Cal Fire.

—Jamey Padожino

East Palo Alto fire displaces 11

Eleven East Palo Alto residents, including four children, were displaced Dec. 24 after a fire dam-
gaged their Oakland Avenue home.

None of the occupants were injured in the fire, which began on the first floor of the two-story residential building, according to a news release from Menlo Park Fire Protection District fire Chief Harold SchapelHousman. A neighbor saw smoke coming from the building at about 9:39

See CRIME BRIEFS, page 9

January 1, 2021  AlmanacNews.com  The Almanac  7
St. Anthony’s shifts its Padua Dining Room to offer hot meals to-go

By Rickey Ono

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Don’t Go It Alone for The Holidays

You are not alone. This time of year can normally be very stressful, let alone during a pandemic when we are asked to shelter in place and minimize contact with family and friends.

If you are struggling, you can turn to Avidas Care Partners (ACP) for help.

Call (650) 289-5438 to request a crisis intervention, an elder care consult, family mediation and emotional support during these challenging times.

We are here for you.

HOLIDAY CHEERS

We’ve designed, fabricated and produced unique garden-themed planter containers, an assortment of desktop ornamental office items, and a global-bound, erect-garden planting system.

The historic Ravenswood, California community continues its humanitarian support of public and social safety in the Bay Area under the 1945 U.N. jurisdiction. We are advised by the U.N. association of Oakland.

In our fight against COVID-19, we are delivering one million apple stores and pumpkin factory containers to 192 countries. FREE DELIVERY!

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CAPTAIN PUMPKS
Project Leader on a Mission

THE (OTHER) APPLE STORE for your childrens educational, anti-viral, immune building, farming future

RAVENSWOOD GARDENKITS PRODUCTS

Leland Francois – proprietor, inventor, gardener
P.O. Box 51524 Ravenswood Industrial Park, CA (650) 461-0276
Email us for online product details: gardenkitsorc@yahoo.com

Don’t Go It Alone for The Holidays

You are not alone. This time of year can normally be very stressful, let alone during a pandemic when we are asked to shelter in place and minimize contact with family and friends.

If you are struggling, you can turn to Avidas Care Partners (ACP) for help.

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Atherton: Police officers test positive for COVID

By Angela Swartz
Almanac Staff Writer

Two Atherton police officers and one support staff member tested positive for COVID-19 last month, according to police Chief Steve McCulley. They fell ill during the first week of December and are expected to return to work the first week of January, he said.

“This does serve as a good reminder that police officers and other first responders do not have the ability to shelter-in-place and stay at home as we have to remain on the front lines to respond to the safety and security needs of those who we serve,” he said in a Dec. 24 email.

The force, which employs 21 officers, has been responding to a recent spate of residential burglaries in town (there have been 10 since Oct. 1). No one else on staff was forced to quarantine and all contact tracing has been completed, McCulley said.

“If in no way impacted police services for our residents,” he said. “We have been and continue to maintain very strict COVID protocols to help ensure the health and safety of our team members, their family members, and our residents.”

It is unknown how the officers and staff member contracted the virus, he added.

The town’s officers should receive one of the COVID-19 vaccines by the end of January, McCulley said. Two Menlo Park Fire Protection District firefighters were vaccinated last week.

Email Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com

CRIME BRIEFS

continued from page 7

A fire at an Oakwood Avenue home in East Palo Alto displaced 11 residents on Dec. 24.

The family of Frida Velazquez, whose house was damaged by the fire, has started a GoFundMe page to raise money for the recovery effort. For more information or to donate, visit is.gd/fundraiser382.

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Contributions to the Holiday Fund go directly to programs that benefit Peninsula residents. Last year, Almanac readers and foundations contributed $150,000 from more than 150 donors for the 10 agencies that feed the hungry, house the homeless and provide numerous other services to those in need.

Contributions to the Holiday Fund will be matched, to the extent possible, by generous community organizations, foundations and individuals, including the Rotary Club of Menlo Park Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. No administrative costs will be deducted from the gifts, which are tax-deductible as permitted by law.

All donations to the Holiday Fund will be shared equally among the 10 recipient agencies listed on this page.
Thank you for donating to the Holiday Fund

Almanac Holiday Fund Donor List
As of Dec. 22, 121 donors have contributed $190,074 to the Almanac Holiday Fund.

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* Donor did not want to publish the amount of the gift.

Changes or corrections to listings may be made by contacting Kali Shiloh at kshiloh@almanacnews.com.

DONATE ONLINE:
siliconvalleycf.org/ almanac-holiday-fund

By Mike Goodkind
Special to The Almanac

In the midst of a pandemic, Literacy Partners-Menlo Park transformed a 10-year-old library-based nonprofit’s mission to now serve a greater number of local residents of all age groups.

On Dec. 2, Literacy Partners made its first grant, giving up to $50,000 to StreetCode’s Level Up digital educational effort in Belle Haven and surrounding communities.

The board of directors of Literacy Partners-Menlo Park (LPMP), formerly known as Project Read-Literacy Partners, adopted new bylaws in May to be able to support worthy organizations beyond its previous mission restricted to library-based adult and family literacy. In 2018, the city of Menlo Park doubled its annual support to Project Read to $100,000, enabling LPMP, a 501(c) 3, to identify projects to fund throughout the broader Menlo Park community.

Andrew Marcos, a senior development director for Greystar who became LPMP’s secretary last January, said that Level Up provides laptops as free rentals to individuals for education. In thanking Literacy Partners, Olutunde Sobomehin, StreetCode’s CEO, said the grant will be targeted to hire a course creator who, with the help of Stanford University interns, will coach students on how to use their new laptops.

In February, the original Project Read-Literacy Partner board had approved a $40,000 grant to the Menlo Park Library to construct two soundproof booths in the main library for small meetings, including privacy for tutoring pairs, and to provide 10 laptops for use by tutor-learner pairs in library programs. Although the pandemic has temporarily delayed construction of the cubicles, LPMP remains committed to fund this proposal and to consider new grants for city-sponsored literacy projects when requested.

Board members and officers of LPMP are excited about the new mission to expand literacy and are actively vetting new opportunities. In October, John Schniedwind, a retired investment executive from American Century Investments, joined LPMP as treasurer. He said LPMP matches his interest in mixing local philanthropy, hands-on volunteering — including tutoring with the Project Read program — and international involvement as volunteer treasurer of a rural health program in Uganda.

“I’m enthusiastic about having a cockpit seat in the expanded work of LPMP in our community that’s being made possible by the generosity of a surprisingly broad, diverse and active group of neighbors. Rather than talking about innovations, I feel grateful to be part of creative solutions, including Level Up,” he said.

Other current board members include Tiffany Hayes, associate director of development, institutional partnerships, at Samaritan House of San Mateo County and LPMP’s vice president of donor relations; Leticia Garcia, a longtime Silicon Valley project management executive and LPMP’s vice president of social outreach; and myself.

See LITERACY PARTNERS, page 19

Azucena Sandoval, left, and Menlo Park resident Betty Meissner met as a learner-tutor pair for more than 10 years with the Menlo Park Library’s Project Read, funded by the recently renamed Literacy Partners-Menlo Park.

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Manager's Corner

I’d like to begin by noting a few of the four cornerstones of the District Manager’s position: a history of service, fiscal responsibility, our mission to provide quality management, and a commitment to the community that we serve.

The West Bay Sanitary District was established in 1902 when the communities of Menlo Park and Atherton were incorporated. Realizing the need to obtain sanitation in the early estate-building period of this area, in October 1902 a petition was signed by 35 residents and presented to the Board of Supervisors of San Mateo County requesting an election be called to vote on the formation of the sanitary district. The election, which brought the District into being, was held at the Menlo Park Hotel on December 10, 1902. Some of the first sewer system infrastructure was installed beginning in 1903 at the corner of Fair Oaks Lane and Middletown Road in Atherton. Senator Charles N. Felton was selected as the first President of the District Board. The first District Manager duties were carried out by “Honest” John McBain a well-known contractor, builder, and figure in the area.

Since 1902 the District has gained a reputation for being a progressive District with a professional, motivated, and dedicated staff. The District’s maintenance, construction, and water quality staff are all certified by the California Water Environment Association. The certification process ensures staff is highly skilled in confined space entry, safe traffic control, trench excavation, inspection, operational competencies and more. We are very proud of our staff and the level of public service they provide.

There is no doubt we have all been challenged with the onset of the global pandemic COVID-19. During the early stages of the pandemic, being deemed part of “Essential Government Functions”, we took immediate steps to protect the public and ourselves from the virus. Fortunately, our Personal Protective Equipment inventory was in place since it was already part of our daily work prior to the pandemic. Not knowing what was to come, I immediately separated the crews and broke them up into two groups. The two groups were to report to two separate corporation yards. One at Burgess Ave and Laurel Street and the second at Marsh Road and Bayfront Road. By taking facial coverings and social distancing seriously, we have been able to avoid the virus affecting our staff thus far.

I’m very grateful to have such a self-motivated staff and supportive Board of Directors. No challenge is too great for the West Bay Sanitary District. Through this unusual 2020 calendar year we have now entered into the next phase of West Bay’s history by opening our first Recycled Water Facility. The facility provides up to 500,000 gallons per day of recycled water used for irrigation purposes. This effort reduces the need to use fresh drinking water for irrigation purposes. We are working on the second recycled water facility in the Bayfront Area as we speak.

In spite of all the challenges 2020 has brought with the pandemic, fires, civil unrest, and most recently a contested national election, the West Bay Sanitary District remains committed to our local community, and to our calling of providing excellent and professional customer service. We plan to continue to invest in our infrastructure to protect public health and the environment for many generations to come.

I wish everyone a healthy and prosperous New Year.

WIPES ARE NOT FLUSHABLE

The District has seen an increased use of wipes in the sewer since the COVID-19 shut down. We want to remind everyone that “flushable” wipes are not flushable. Wipes clog pipes and pumps and cause sanitary sewer overflows in our community. Please do not flush wipes, use the waste basket instead. Thank you.

OFFICE HOURS

The West Bay Sanitary District Administration Office will be open to customers Monday thru Thursday from 9am-3pm and Fridays by appointment. Customers are required to wear face coverings and practice social distancing of at least 6 feet. Telephone hours will remain the same Monday–Friday 8am–4:30pm.

We encourage customers to arrange for remote permit applications to info@westbaysanitary.org or call (650) 321-0384 for more information. Sewer permits will be issued in the order received.

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

West Bay continues to work hard to maintain our system by means of replacing aging pipes with PVC and HDPE (High Density Polyethylene), the leading standard materials for sewer. The District has awarded the bid for the North Bay Road and Ringwood Avenue Capital Improvement Project. This project is for the replacement & rehabilitation of approximately 11,305 feet of sanitary sewer mains with major portions of the work in Menlo Park’s Flood Triangle neighborhood and along Ringwood Avenue. Work is forecasted to begin in early 2021. The District is enforcing the strictest construction protocols in order to safely deal with the current pandemic.

WEST BAY HIGH-TECH SEWER CLEANING SAVES ONE MILLION DOLLARS

West Bay Sanitary District Pipe Line Inspection Unit is the “underground eyes” for the District. Part of the operation and maintenance program includes the video inspection of each sanitary sewer pipe in the District via CCTV (Closed Circuit Television). Recently the District’s Pipe Line Inspection Crew embarked on an ambitious journey to video inspect and clean West Bay’s large diameter sanitary sewer trunklines which consist of pipe that ranges from 24” to 54” in diameter. After attempting to contract the work out to various contractors, like it had been done in the past, the least expensive bid came in at a price well north of $1 million. Keeping in mind the financial impact that it would have on the District and its constituents, staff moved forward with the project and kept the work in house. Video inspecting over 60,000 feet of large diameter pipe is no small feat, it requires lots of skill, ability and the correct equipment. The District purchased a large video inspection robotic transporter called “The Mudmaster.” The Mudmaster has the ability to video inspect pipe that ranges anywhere from 24” up to 72” while having the capability of being steered left or right. We’ve had great success with this new capability. This project has been an excellent milestone for the District being that it has never been done in the past by in-house crews in the past. Despite the various challenges that came along including many graveyard shifts, the eye was kept on the prize. The cost of this project was completed for under $200,000.00. After saving over one million dollars and being successful in completing the project, other agencies have inquired about contracting our services using interagency agreements.

For a sewer emergency or sewer-related problems, please call us first! You can reach us day or night at (650) 321-0384. If the main public sewer line is blocked, only West Bay has the authority to clear the system. If the public sewer main line is clear, we may advise you to contact a plumbing contractor to resolve the issue on your property.
WEST BAY SANITARY DISTRICT RECEIVES TRANSPARENCY CERTIFICATE OF EXCELLENCE

The Special District Leadership Foundation (SDLF) in recognition of its outstanding efforts to promote transparency and good governance awarded the West Bay Sanitary District its Transparency Certificate of Excellence.

The award is a testament to West Bay Sanitary District’s commitment to open government. To receive the award, the District demonstrated the completion of essential governance transparency requirements, including conducting ethics training for all board members, properly conducting open and public meetings, and filing financial transactions and compensation reports to the State Controller in a timely manner.

RIBBON CUTTING EVENT FOR THE WEST BAY SANITARY DISTRICT AND SHARON HEIGHTS GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP – RECYCLED WATER TREATMENT PLANT

The District is proud to report the water reuse partnership with Sharon Heights Golf and Country Club is off to a fantastic start! Since late July 2020, the District has delivered in excess of 20 million gallons to the course for landscape irrigation. The benefits to a recycled water partnership include reducing demands and stress on the Hetch Hetchy freshwater supply, eliminating the need to transport water, reducing environmental impacts, and improving sustainability. The District is currently pursuing the many avenues for water reuse, such as for toilet flushing, dust control on construction projects, street sweeping, and water for cooling towers. The District is very excited to be a part of this program with a commitment to community and environmental stewardship!

The State Revolving Fund loan will be paid back by Sharon Heights Golf & Country Club.

Funding for this $22.6 million recycled water project has been provided in full or in part by Proposition 1. The Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014. Funding has also been provided through the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, which is capitalized through a variety of funding sources including grants from the United States Environmental Protection Agency and state bond proceeds.

West Bay Sanitary District operates a wastewater collection system serving Menlo Park, Atherton, Portola Valley and several small portions of unincorporated areas of San Mateo County through a network of over 200 miles of mainline pipe and 12 pumping stations serving approximately 54,000 citizens.

Meet the New Members of the Management Team:

Finance Manager, Debra Fisher, joined the District in March 2020. She brings twenty years of experience in government finance at Special Districts in California. Ms. Fisher holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Business Management and Accounting and a Master’s Degree in Business Administration.

Operations Superintendent, Bob Hulsmann, was promoted to the position of Operations Superintendent in July 2020. In this position he oversees the Operations and Maintenance of West Bay’s wastewater collection system, in-house pipeline repair crew, and the pump station facilities. He joined the West Bay team 10 years ago as the Pump Facility Supervisor and has over 30 years’ experience in the wastewater industry. He holds a California Water Environment Association Grade III certificate in Mechanical Technology and a Grade IV in Collection System Maintenance.
to classrooms. Some parents stressed the negative impacts of distance learning on their children's mental health, while many struggled to work from home while acting as de facto teachers and tech support to their children.

Parents and teachers in the Sequoia Union High School District, in particular, were at odds over whether to resume in-person instruction. Some parents implored board members to reopen schools as the number of students with more than one failing grade jumped to 29% in the fall of 2020 from 19.7% in 2019.

Leadership changes and controversies

The Las Lomitas Elementary School District was rocked by racist and misogynistic tweets about Vice President-elect Kamala Harris by then-board president Jon Venverloh’s wife in November. He stepped down following community outcry over the social media posts. Jason Morimoto was elected to the board in Nov. 3, but the other election-winner, Jody Leng, announced she wouldn’t join the board, leaving the the school board to appoint new members to fill two of its five seats (trustees Diana Honda and Bill Steinmetz did not seek reelection and their terms ended on Dec. 11).

More backlash against district officials came later in November when a Change.org petition began circulating to recall trustee John Earnhardt. Parents supporting the recall effort said his comments in a local newspaper reacting to the Venverloh tweets lacked sensitivity and warrant his removal.

District parents started the online petition after Earnhardt declined a request that he step down from the board. The parents took issue with statements he made to the Palo Alto Daily Post, calling Venverloh a “very diligent as a board member and impactful for the district” and noting the “controversy moved quickly because it spread through electronic media and parents are more engaged in the district than in the past” because board meetings are happening over Zoom.

An official recall petition would require signatures from a quarter of the district’s registered voters in order to move forward. Board members decided to appoint new trustees since the cost of a special election would be nearly half a million dollars, and on Dec. 18, they selected Molly Finn, a candidate who lost the Nov. 3 election, and parent Cynthia Solis Yi.

The Sequoia Union High School District’s embattled Superintendent Mary Streshly was paid over $250,000 by the district to resign in September. This came after the teachers union and other top administrators, including local high school principals and vice principals, called for her ouster, decrying her as an ineffective leader.

Two newcomers filled contested seats on the Sequoia district’s governing board following the November election. District residents, for the first time, voted based on the geographical area of the school district where they reside.

Rich Ginn, a parent and business owner who previously served eight years on the Las Lomitas district governing board, unseated incumbent Georgia Jack for the Trustee Area C seat, which represents Woodside, West Menlo Park and Portola Valley. Shawneece Stevenson won the Trustee Area E seat to represent Menlo Park neighborhoods east of Highway 101 as well as East Palo Alto. Candidate Jacqui Cebrian dropped out of the race in September and threw her support to Stevenson.

Enrollment

Enrollment shrank at local public schools in fall of 2020 as families moved out of the area, joined learning pods or turned to private schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the local elementary school districts have seen small dips in enrollment over the last few years, the Sequoia Union High School District had seen steady growth up until this school year.

Sports seasons disrupted

Although high school athletes were allowed to do conditioning training with safety measures in place, students never competed against other teams. This came after the teachers union and other top administrators, including local high school principals and vice principals, called for her ouster, decrying her as an ineffective leader.

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The California Department of Public Health issued new guidelines in mid-December stating that youth sports cannot start until at least Jan. 25.

Stife at TIDE Academy

In February, the leadership at the newest high school in the Sequoia district was accused of tracking students, retaliation against those who complained and mishandling an anonymous letter that claimed to represent the concerns of a group of TIDE Academy employees.

Among the most serious in the litany of complaints about the STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math) focused school in Menlo Park was the allegation about tracking, the practice of sorting students into different programs of study based on their perceived abilities, which critics say has historically harmed students of color and students from less-affluent families.

Other complaints in the letter included students being told that they couldn’t transfer out of the school, that the technology center was inoperable and concerns that the TIDE principal’s friendship with Superintendent Streshly prevented necessary oversight.

Email Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com
Six indicted in federal mail-theft case

Defendants allegedly used real and counterfeit mailbox keys to steal identification documents

By Sue Dremann

A federal grand jury in San Francisco has indicted six people, including a 34-year-old Palo Alto woman, on charges related to a long-running conspiracy to steal mail and commit identity fraud, U.S. Attorney David L. Anderson and Postal Inspector Service Inspector in Charge Rafael Nuñez announced Dec. 9.

The 18-count indictment, which was filed on Nov. 17 and unsealed Dec. 9, is against Ashley Overton, 34, of Palo Alto, and five San Jose residents: Mark Guardado Jr., 38; Juan Dagio, 40; Brian Clapp, 37; Andrew Perez, 30; and Jaime Valencia-Arias, 23.

Beginning in January 2018 and extending through August 2019, the defendants allegedly conspired to steal U.S. mail by using real or counterfeit postal keys to access mailboxes in apartment buildings. They allegedly raided mailboxes in Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Redwood City, Sunnyvale, Santa Clara and San Jose, according to the U.S. Attorney’s Office.

They allegedly exchanged text messages about using the postal keys, some of which Guardado prosecutors said he claimed to have made, to go out on “missions,” during which they stole the mail in bulk. The group allegedly took personal identifying information, such as names, addresses, telephone numbers and dates of birth, from the stolen mail and other sources.

This allowed the information to create counterfeit California state driver’s licenses in the victims’ names but with the defendants’ photographs on the licenses, according to federal prosecutors.

The defendants allegedly used the counterfeit licenses to activate and steal fraudulent credit cards. They negotiated checks and used other stolen or fraudulently obtained access devices to obtain money and services of value such as hotel rooms and cash advances at a casino.

Overton is charged with one count of conspiracy to commit mail theft and to commit fraud in connection with identification documents; one count of fraud in connection with identification documents and possession of five or more of the documents and two counts of fraudulently obtaining access devices (Guardado); one count is punishable by up to five years in prison and up to a $250,000 fine.

She also faces one count of possession of 15 or more unauthorized access devices (punishable by up to 10 years in prison and up to $250,000 in fines); and two counts of aggravated identity theft (Guardado); one count is punishable with a maximum of two years in connection to any other sentence and a $250,000 fine).

The other defendants are also charged as follows: one count of conspiracy to commit mail theft and to commit fraud in connection with identification documents (Guardado, Dagio, Clapp and Perez); one count of mail theft (Guardado and Valencia-Arias); one count of possession of stolen mail (Guardado and Dagio); one count of possession of stolen mail (Guardado and Dagio); and one count of aggravated identity theft (Guardado and Dagio).

The charges of fraudulent document-making implements and fraud in connection with identification documents (trafficking) each carry maximum sentences of 15 years in prison and a maximum $250,000 fine.

Fraudulent use of unauthorized access devices and unlawful possession of postal keys and locks each carry a maximum 10-year sentence and $250,000 fine. Mail theft and possession of stolen mail are punishable by a maximum of five years in prison and up to $250,000 fine, according to the U.S. Attorney’s Office.

The defendants are in either federal or state custody except for Perez, who remains at large. Guardado and Clapp made their initial federal court appearances on Wednesday morning before the U.S. Magistrate Judge Lauren Beeler. Guardado was ordered detained pending a further hearing related to bail on Dec. 14. Clapp was released on a $25,000 bond. Valencia-Arias was scheduled to make his initial appearance on Dec. 10.

The remaining defendants are scheduled to appear in federal court on Jan. 12 for a status hearing.

Email Sue Dremann at sdremann@pawweekly.com

COMMUNITY BRIEFS

Transit district CEO stepping down

Jim Hartnett announced that he will leave his post as CEO and general manager of the San Mateo County Transit District, overseeing Caltrain and SamTrans, in April, with Deputy CEO and General Manager Carter Mau scheduled to take his place in an interim role.

Belmont Mayor Charles Stone, chair of the San Mateo County Transit District board of directors, praised Hartnett for bringing stability to the district and for staying on past his five-year commitment, to provide guidance during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“When Jim was hired in 2015, he said his top two goals were to obtain a dedicated source of funds for Caltrain and to solve the SamTrans structural deficit,” Stone said. “These lofty goals have challenged the district for decades, but Jim was finally able to reach them. Thanks to his leadership, the transit services that our communities depend on are well-prepared to survive the pandemic and will emerge equipped with the resources needed to expand service and address the congestion issues that we all know will return.”

Voters in San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties in November approved Measure RR, a 30-year additional sales tax of 0.125% that will generate an estimated $100 million annually for the Caltrain rail service.

“Measure RR saved Caltrain from a potential pandemic shutdown in the short term, but it is important to acknowledge that the measure was in the works for years prior to the pandemic,” Stone said.

San Mateo County voters passed Measure W, a half-cent sales tax to improve transit and relieve traffic congestion, in 2018. Half of the proceeds of the measure are dedicated to SamTrans and Stone credited Hartnett for extensive public engagement leading up to the vote.

Hartnett, in a post on his Facebook page, said that while he is stepping down, he is not ready for retirement, writing, “I have new courses to chart, new opportunities to embrace and new things to learn. I am excited for my next chapters.”

Small business grants available

Small businesses in California can apply for grants of up to $25,000 through the state’s Small Business COVID-19 Relief Grant Program.

The first round of grants opened Wednesday morning and closes at 11:59 p.m. on Jan. 8, with approvals announced starting Jan. 13.

Grant amounts will vary from $5,000 to $25,000, depending on the applicant’s annual gross revenue. Nonprofits are also eligible to apply.

The grants are part of the $500 million relief program that Gov. Gavin Newsom announced on Nov. 30.

For more information about the grants, visit careflegant.com.

The California Small Business Development Center (SBDC) is available to assist with grant applications. People can learn more at californiabsdc.org/covid-19-relief-grant.

CZU Lightning Complex fires controlled

Cal Fire CZU Unit Chief Ian Larkin announced the CZU Lightning Complex Fires are controlled at 5 p.m. Dec. 23. This means the fire is fully extinguished, and there is no longer any danger of reignition.

“We were at a point where we felt comfortable calling it controlled,” Larkin said. “We had finished mitigating most of the fire suppression activities.”

The fires burned 86,509 acres, or about 135 square miles, claiming one life and destroying 1,490 structures. About 22,755 of the acres burned were in San Mateo County.

—Bay City News Service

A foxy new year

It’s customary for some to ring in the new year with a smooch at midnight, but how about celebrating the first day of 2021 with a “fox kiss?” Learn about this charming animal behavior, and many other interesting facts about gray foxes when Bill Leikam, known as the “Fox Guy,” speaks at Woodside Arts & Culture’s January First Friday talk.

Leikam shares his presentation “A Year with the Urban Gray Fox” in 2021’s inaugural First Friday talk, which takes place online Jan. 1 at 7 p.m.

See COMMUNITY BRIEFS, page 19

COMBINED COVID-19 coverage


Coronavirus continued from page 7

Firefighters continued from page 5

potentially having COVID-19, and a third of those were confirmed as positive cases.

The team returned to normal duty when other fire responders became comfortable with new patient care protocols to protect the safety measures, the release states.

Future vaccinations

A third of the fire district’s 150 employees — support staff, or administrative personnel — are not considered front-line workers and will not be vaccinated now. “I don’t plan to be vaccinated until every other employee that works for me has had the opportunity to go first,” said Schapeloehman. “I also feel strongly that front-line police officers need to be vaccinated before we do. It’s hard to imagine why these important members of our public safety family and team, ‘street cops’ who closely work to support our front-line fire personnel, are not being vaccinated now. But I am in the community, are not being vaccinated as of yet. I’m sure it will get resolved but unless something happens on my watch I don’t feel we should go forward with it.”

Meanwhile, Atherton’s police Chief Steve McCulley expects his officers to be vaccinated toward the end of January, he said in a Dec. 27 email.

Email Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com
A San Mateo County Sheriff's vehicle drives past a Black Lives Matter protest at the corner of Portola Road and Alpine Road in Portola Valley on June 21.

PORTOLA VALLEY 2020
continued from page 5

from residents. The importance of wildlife preparedness and prevention was only underscored by the nearby CZU fires. And the town, prompted by the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, initiated discussions on racial equity and policing, forming a council subcommittee to engage residents and the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office on these issues. The conversations have prompted an examination of the degree to which past and present policies in town may have unintentionally perpetuated racism and Portola Valley's reputation as a wealthy white enclave lacking socioeconomic and ethnic diversity.

The council also saw change at the end of 2020 as longtime member Ann Wengert declined to run for reelection in November. Portola Valley had its first Neely tasting room permit

The Planning Commission in early February provided feedback to town planning staff about a proposal from Neely Wine, located at 555 Portola Road, to allow wine tasting and wine club events on its property. First introduced in 2019, the proposal has been met with some resistance from residents concerned about the potential for increased noise and traffic. The Neely family has maintained that it needs to enhance the financial viability of the 228-acre property to keep it as open space, and that it would mainly target residents rather than out-of-towners in its wine club plans. Commissioners in February wore generally positive about the proposal's compliance with various criteria, including site adequacy and the proposed tasting room location. Nothing new has developed with the proposal, according to Dennis. A Neely Wine traffic report and planning update is on the Jan. 6 agenda for the town's Bicycle, Pedestrian and Traffic Safety Committee, following a Stanford Wedge look-ahead agenda item.

Wildfire prevention

The wildfire risk in Portola Valley is nothing new, but it has been exacerbated by climate change. That combined with the CZU blaze earlier this year — the largest wildfire on record in San Mateo County — has increased the urgency among local officials and residents to prepare and adapt.

In April 2019, the Town Council formed the ad hoc Wildfire Preparedness Committee to advise the council periodically on ways to reduce wildfire danger and “increase resident resiliency in a wildfire emergency,” according to its charter.

At the end of 2019, the council adopted a number of committee recommendations that are in various stages of implementation, including increasing outreach and education to residents on vegetation management and creating shaded fuel breaks along roadways with large adjacent properties.

The committee’s latest proposals, which it will further develop before bringing them back to the council, include requiring 200 feet of defensible spaces on properties with 30% or greater average down slope; mandating that the largest properties in town have approved vegetation management plans; and banning future planting of five highly flammable trees: acacia, cypress, eucalyptus, juniper and pines.

The council in February is also slated to review draft amendments to the building code to address home hardening in new construction, which would mandate encloosed eaves, noncombustible siding and ember-resistant vents, and ban all combustible roofing materials, expressly shake roofs, according to a Dec. 9 staff report.

Unlike in 2019, however, Portola Valley did not see widespread power shutoffs from PG&E, which the utility initiated to reduce the risk of wildfires sparking from power lines that could fall in windy and dry conditions. In September, PG&E officials spoke with residents during a virtual meeting on wildfire preparedness, vegetation management and equipment maintenance, and the council formed a new PG&E Public Safety Subcommittee to explore the town’s relationship with the utility.

Race and Equity Subcommittee

Following international Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd in May, the council formed a Race and Equity Subcommittee — made up of Maryann Derwin and Richards — that has spearheaded various efforts to engage residents and the San Mateo County Sheriff’s Office on issues related to policing, race and implicit bias, including creating a page on its website to collect public comments and launching a series of virtual town hall meetings on racial equity and policing in September. In October the town hosted a virtual panel entitled “Policing, Race & Justice in the San Mateo County Sheriff’s Office,” which included Sheriff Carlos Bolanos, District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe and Rev. Lorrie Carter Owens, president of the San Mateo County chapter of the NAACP, among others.

At the June meeting when the subcommittee was formed,
Mountain View High grad is the Bay Area’s first female Eagle Scout

Teenage trailblazer Emerson Domke talks about how she attained the prestigious Boy Scout ranking

By Kate Bradshaw
Almanac Staff Writer

In February 2019, Boy Scouts of America, after 110 years of boys-only programming, for the first time in the organization’s history permitted girls to earn the rank of Eagle Scout.

From there, the race was on. And Emerson Domke, then a senior at Mountain View High School, was ready.

After countless hours of hard work, she has become one of the first female Eagle Scouts in the U.S. and the first in the Bay Area to pass the review board requirement to earn the rank, according to Michelle McIntyre, spokesperson for the Scouting organization’s Silicon Valley Monterey Bay Council. An Eagle Scout ranking is the highest ranking available to youth within the organization.

While Domke was new to being part of Scouts BSA — the new name that Boy Scouts of America adopted after it began welcoming girls — she was already familiar with many broader elements of Scouting. She had been involved with Girl Scouts from first through eighth grade, worked at a Boy Scout summer camp, and participated in a co-ed Scouting program through the White Stag Leadership Academy in Monterey, she said in an interview.

She decided to join BSA for several reasons, she said. Domke wanted to set an example and serve as a leader and mentor for younger female Scouts who might be more intimidated when they joined. She also has a number of male family members who are Eagle Scouts, she said. But once she learned it would be possible for her to earn an Eagle ranking — by meeting all of the requirements in a mere 19 months, the least amount of time possible — she became even more excited about the idea.

“I knew I wanted to join once I knew I could reach Eagle,” she said.

From there, Domke developed a careful and ambitious plan to make up for lost time — traditionally, Scouts have from around age 11 until their 18th birthday to meet the requirements. From mandates that each Eagle Scout spend six months as a Life Scout, earn 21 merit badges, serve in his or her troop for at least six months, and complete the notoriously challenging Eagle Scout Service Project, all by or shortly after the Scout’s 18th birthday.

“You definitely stand out as a girl”

The Boy Scouts organization had run for nearly 110 years before letting any girls in, and coming into an organization with such a strong boys-only tradition as a high school senior felt strange at first, she said.

“You definitely stand out as a girl,” she said. “It’s definitely intimidating if you’re not used to it.”

But being the only girl, or one among a small minority of girls, was not something new for Domke. As an engineering student, and as a participant on her internationally competitive robotics team, she said she is used to being outnumbered by boys in activities she enjoys.

Fortunately, she said, as a young woman pursuing engineering and robotics she felt supported and included by teachers and mentors, which gave her confidence in joining other male-dominated activities. Being one of a small minority of female employees at a Boy Scout camp, where she was a merit badge instructor teaching subjects such as photography and ceramics, also helped her get used to the dynamics of Boy Scout troops.

“I feel a lot more comfortable than I think a lot of my peers are,” she said.

When asked if she preferred Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, she said that it’s a tough question. She participated in the programs at different ages, and the things each program teaches are different. Girl Scouts, which she participated in from first through eighth grade, is focused on women empowering young women, while BSA is more focused on empowerment through the spread of knowledge, she said. They’re equal and people who do both enjoy them both, she said, but personally, she favors BSA.

Scouting and adulthood

It wasn’t far into Domke’s Scouting journey when a significant obstacle emerged: college.

After graduating from Mountain View High School in 2019, she enrolled at the University of Colorado Boulder to study mechanical engineering. In an effort to manage both a rigorous college workload and meet her accelerated Scouting goals, she spent the bulk of last summer working ahead on the requirements, leaving out the last third of the work, including her Eagle project, to do this summer.

For her Eagle Project, she and volunteers assembled 500 personal health kits for homeless students in the San Jose School District. Each kit includes a reusable cloth mask, paper mask, hand sanitizer, thermometer, facial tissues, gloves, and a note with CDC guidelines, according to press release.

Assembling these kits required organizing about 20 people to contribute a total of 160 volunteer hours — all while the pandemic and the CZU fires were underway, Domke said. She said she had to spend many extra hours planning COVID-19 safety measures and checking in with volunteers to make sure they were healthy before they arrived.

Ultimately, she wrapped up the requirements around mid-to-late September, she said. And while Scouts BSA plans to announce the inaugural class of female Eagle Scouts nationwide in February, Domke said she is the first in the Bay Area to attain the rank.

“Earning the rank of Eagle Scout takes hard work and perseverance, and we are honored to recognize Emerson Domke for this significant accomplishment,” stated Jason Stein, CEO of the Silicon Valley Monterey Bay Council of Boy Scouts of America, in a statement. “Along the journey to Eagle Scout, young people gain new skills, learn to overcome obstacles and demonstrate leadership among their peers and in their communities. These benefits are invaluable for everyone, and we are thrilled that they are now available to even more youth.”

Domke said there’s a lot from the program she plans to take with her into adulthood. In addition to fond memories of backpacking and camping trips in the Sierras and Big Basin, she said, she values skills she’s learned like cooking, camping, taking care of oneself, and figuring out how to plan a trip.

Her biggest takeaway from the program, she added, is learning how to make a long-term plan and stick to it.

Domke says her Scouting days are far from over, though. She has about a year and half to wait until she’s 21, at which point she’s planning to participate in Scouting as an adult leader. The troop she joined still maintains separate male and female leaders for each gender group, although they participate in activities together. For female troops in particular, there has been a shortage of women to lead vigorous outdoor trips, and she’s looking forward to becoming that leader for younger female Scouts.

She said she plans to continue to participate in outdoor trips near her college in Colorado and continue to set an example of how to succeed in male-dominated spheres.

While Domke may be the first local female Eagle Scout, the growing number of female BSA Scouts indicates she won’t be the last. Her troop has about 40 to 50 boys and 17 girls, but the number of girls enrolled now is up substantially from six girls a year and a half ago, she said.

The recruitment period for new Scouts typically happens around February.
MENLO PARK 2020
continued from page 1

survivors of domestic violence experience.

Local nonprofits stepped up in a big way to help a growing number of people experiencing significantly more need than even in the area’s most booming times. Second Harvest Food Bank has more than doubled the number of low-income households it serves in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, even while battling a decline in volunteer help. Efforts by Vegan Outreach and Facebook also offered food aid to those in need. Kepler’s Literary Foundation brought distance learning author visits and books to Ravenswood City School District students.

Menlo Park residents developed their own emergency response network, MPC Ready, to organize support for those needing help. And Belle Haven residents, led by Belle Haven Action, began to run their own popular neighborhood COV-19 testing site.

Spring

The Menlo Park City Council had its work cut out this year, as the City Hall reopened for curbside pickup with a by-mail pilot program; library services reopened for curbside pickup with a by-mail pilot program; and development proposals continued to be processed.

May and early June, tackled what to cut with an estimated $12 million budget shortfall by reducing staffing by 15%, including laying off the equivalent of 44 full-time staffers, and cutting the police department’s traffic unit, proactive gang and narcotics investigations and daytime parking enforcement. The city also let go of its community development director, merging that role with library services director.

Linda Mendenhall, owner of Old World Designs, watches participants of a virtual “stitch-in” show off their needlepoint projects over Zoom while inside her downtown Menlo Park shop on April 3.

between what restaurants needed — space for outdoor dining — and what retailers said they needed, which was parking and minimal street shutdowns. Many hours were spent on the council’s virtual meeting platform, GoToMeeting, finessing what parts of Santa Cruz Avenue could or should be shut down and when. The current setup is set to last through February.

The city also made progress toward some environmental aspirations, becoming the first city to declare a goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. Menlo Park’s first recycled water system was launched, focused on transforming former wastewater into irrigation water at the Sharon Heights Golf and Country Club.

On the development front, the city has been working with Facebook and architecture firm Hart Howerton to make good on Facebook’s offer to rebuild the Onetta Harris Community Center complex in Belle Haven. As of September, the City Council was scheduled to hold a public hearing on the proposal on Jan. 12.

Other projects moving ahead include the large luxury development underway at El Camino Real and Oak Grove Avenue, formerly known as Station 1300, which was passed off to a new developer and rebranded as Springline; a new mixed-use development in Allied Arts; the Guild Theatre rebuild; and environmental review work for several large developments planned on the city’s Bay side.

It wasn’t a great year for two federal large developments planned on the city’s Bay side.

Fall

In August, as if a global pandemic wasn’t bad enough, disaster struck again in the form of a lightning storm that ignited blazes across California. A number of lightning strikes grew into the CZU August Lightning Complex fires, which became the largest on record in San Mateo County. The blazes burned more than 86,500 acres.

The police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other unarmed Black people nationally triggered widespread protests. Locally, community protests were held up and down the Peninsula, led in many cases by young people and people of color.

The city of Menlo Park began to hold discussions about police reform when police Chief Dave Bertini abruptly resigned during a June meeting. Dave Spiller has taken on the role of interim police chief, and the city is working to recruit a permanent replacement.

The events also opened the door for more frank local conversations about race, including a discussion about neighborhood racism in July and a county forum in October in which the county sheriff, district attorney and advocates discussed race and law enforcement reform.

The year brought difficult times for the community’s small business owners. They made efforts to transition to online sales and delivery services, trying to follow constantly shifting regulations for safely operating, but some didn’t make it.

Among the businesses that shuttered in 2020 were J Floral and The Pet Place, while others shut down temporarily, like the Vallombrosa Center. Community fundraisers were organized to help institutions like Cafe Borrone and The Refuge.

Employment

The Almanac offers advertising for Employment, as well as Home and Business Services.

If you wish to learn more about these advertising options, please call 650.223.6582 or email digitalads@paweekly.com.

TOWN OF WOODSIDE
2955 WOODSIDE ROAD, WOODSIDE, CA 94062
PLANNING COMMISSION
January 6, 2021 6:00 PM

This meeting is compliant with the Governor’s Executive Order N-25-20 issued on March 4, 2020, allowing for deviation of teleconference rules required by the Brown Act. The purpose of this is to provide the safest environment for staff and the public while allowing for public participation.

Meeting participants are encouraged to submit comments in writing in advance of the meeting. The public may participate via: Zoom meeting or GoToMeeting, finessing the meeting and public comments received will be read into the record.

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Remote Public Comments:
Meeting participants are encouraged to submit public comments in writing in advance of the meeting. The following email will be monitored during the meeting and public comments received will be read into the record.
Email: sharper@woodsidedowntown.org

PUBLIC HEARING
2. Town-wide  ZOAM2020-0004

Town of Woodside  Planner: Joseph Balatbat, Assistant Planner

Study Session to discuss a simplified planning review process for emergency generators in the required setbacks, and permitting challenges for Tesla batteries.

THE APPLICATION MATERIALS ARE AVAILABLE FOR PUBLIC REVIEW BY CONTACTING JOSEPH BALATBAT AT JBALATBAT@WOODSIDETOWN.ORG
acres in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties, 22,755 of which were in San Mateo County, and destroyed nearly 1,500 buildings.

The fires forced evictions for more than 4,500 San Mateo County residents and drew more than 1,500 firefighting personnel to its peak before reaching 100% containment in September and becoming 100% controlled only days ago, according to a Dec. 28 press release. Paid firefighters, volunteer fire brigades, plus some local park rangers all band together to protect homes and forests in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The San Mateo County Large Animal Evacuation Group ran its own rescue operations to bring large animals from the Coastside and Santa Cruz Mountains to safety away from the fires. And the owners of Alice’s Restaurant stepped up to feed firefighters and those who stayed behind the fire’s evacuation lines.

While some areas were protected from the flames, the fires affected beloved forests in parks such as Big Basin State Park, Portola Redwoods State Park, and Pescadero Creek County Park.

Dangerous fire conditions persisted through October and into November, causing households in more remote areas of the Santa Cruz Mountains to face PG&E-mandated power shutoffs.

With the fire threat finally under control, attention turned toward the 2020 election season. In Menlo Park, there was just one contested race as the city completed its switch to district elections from at-large ones. The District 3 seat, which covers a central chunk of the city, had three contenders: Max Fennell, Chelsea Nguyen and Jen Wolosin. Wolosin won the race and was sworn in Dec. 15. The race for the District 5 seat was uncontested, and incumbent Ray Mueller was reelected, this time as a district representative.

Of regional importance, Measure RR also passed, granting Caltrain a more reliable source of funding even as the rail service faces major revenue losses caused by a steep decline in riders due to the pandemic.

Winter

As 2021 begins, all signs indicate the pandemic is likely to get worse before it gets better. Federally approved vaccines provide hope that this nightmare won’t last forever, but the current surge in cases is hitting California especially hard right now — exacerbated by holiday travel — and continues to worsen. Perhaps residents will rally once again to flatten the curve and show their resilience through the upcoming days, weeks and months of 2021.

Email Kate Bradshaw at kbradshaw@almanacnews.com

EIGHTY acres of land remain in Menlo Park, 1259 El Camino Real #176, Menlo Park, CA 94025. Mike Goodkind is the president of Literacy Partners-Menlo Park.

Gray foxes can be found across a wide swath of North and Central America and the northernmost region of South America. Leikam has extensively studied the gray foxes that live in the south San Francisco Bay marshlands, observing their behavior, photographing and recording them through a collection of trail cameras.

His presentation will include an introduction to these amazingly adaptable critters and many tales from two fox families that he following is, how from the family hierarchy develops to how the pups wrestle and play with each other — and what valuable survival lessons their parents teach them.

Spaces are limited for this online talk and registration is required. For more information or to register, visit woodsideartsandculture.org.

—Heather Zimmerman

MENLO PARK 2020

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SCHOOLS REOPENING

continued from page 1

goal of getting kids back to school safely, he said.

The Las Lomitas Elementary School District, which has 1,111 students, received $519,612 in state and federal learning loss mitigation funds, said Superintendent Beth Polito in an email. The money was used to provide internet connectivity and devices for students during virtual learning, additional instructional materials for students to have at home, an additional three days of professional development for staff, and personal protective equipment, Polito said.

An example of the increased costs: material and supplies costs rose from about $680,000 last school year to about $1.4 million this school year, according to the district’s interim 2020-21 budget.

The 2,932-student Menlo Park City School District invested $2.9 million on reopening costs, which included over $600,000 for additional teachers and substitute teachers, about $570,000 for playground support and teachers aides, and $220,000 for COVID testing, according to a district budget document. Of that, $1.5 million came from local, state and federal funds.

“The financial costs to the district continue to impact the short and long term budget planning for the district,” something set for discussion at the next board meeting on Dec. 17, according to a Dec. 3 Menlo Park district school board presentation. “While the right thing to do, reopening does impact the district financially, even with the support of CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) funds.”

The Palo Alto Unified School District’s 2020-21 interim budget update shows COVID expenditures, and associated safety protocols, are costing the district $4.8 million. (The costs of COVID in the budget are not itemized.)

Portola Valley district’s budget bind

The Portola Valley district is especially in a bind with increasing COVID costs.

In March, voters failed to renew Measure P, a parcel tax that raised $1.2 million annually for the district. It expires on June 20, 2021. If there isn’t a renewal before June, the district must make plans for spending reductions.

“Given the current state of the pandemic environment, most importantly not knowing when schools will be able to resume normal operations, and the possibility of additional staffing needed to maintain small cohorts, the administration recommends postponing further budget reductions until 2022-23, and an additional $500,000 in 2023-24,” a staff report for the Dec. 17 school board meeting states.

LITERACY PARTNERS

continued from page 11

During 2020, generous contributors have already provided nearly $75,000 to support literacy through LPMP. Grants are of all sizes, including smaller contributions from recent English language learners in programs LPMP supports, as well as $14,000 from the 2019 Almanac Holiday Fund.

LPMP is one of the beneficiaries of The Almanac’s Holiday Fund. Because The Almanac and its partner the Silicon Valley Community Foundation cover all the administrative costs, every dollar raised goes directly to this year’s 10 nonprofit organizations. Donations to the Holiday Fund can be made at almanacnews.com/holiday-fund.

While all community contributions are highly valued, a grant in October stands out. LPMP received nearly $50,000 from the estate of the late Karen Marie Lundberg, a lifelong educator who had worked at virtually all levels of education, including college teaching. Lundberg crossed paths with Menlo Park literacy programs through her service at JobTrain and Sequoia Adult School and as a manager at Kepler’s Books, where for many years Literacy Partners held a gift-wrapping holiday fundraiser. Before becoming a beloved and dedicated educator she had worked and enjoyed life as a blackjack dealer, a scuba diver, and a florist, and she held a pilot’s license. She died Jan. 6 at the age of 72.

For more information, go to literacypartnersmenlopark.org or email literacypartners.menlo.park@gmail.com. The mailing address is Literacy Partners-Menlo Park, 1259 El Camino Real #176, Menlo Park, CA 94025.

Mike Goodkind is the president of Literacy Partners-Menlo Park.

COMMUNITY BRIEFS

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Gray foxes can be found across a wide swath of North and Central America and the northernmost region of South America. Leikam has extensively studied the gray foxes that live in the south San Francisco Bay marshlands, observing their behavior, photographing and recording them through a collection of trail cameras.

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“Vitalina Varela” by Pedro Costa was the year’s best film.

By Peter Canavese

2020 turned the world upside down in so many ways. Though movies are a relatively trivial example of the existential threat posed by COVID-19, Bay Area movie theaters were effectively shut down for most of the year, giving new life to socially distanced drive-ins and a major shot in the arm to streaming services as Americans hunkered down in front of their TVs. Disney+ emerged as a front-runner in the streaming wars and Quibi lost big, with Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, HBO Max, Apple TV+, and others still hanging tough.

By necessity, the line between cinema and other sight-and-sound art forms has never been thinner than in 2020. We had Steve McQueen’s “Small Axe” (Amazon Prime Video), a series of five telefilms from a major filmmaker that were never intended for theaters. As live theater became all but an impossibility for the foreseeable future, superb filmed telefilms from a major filmmaker that are liable to dwindle dramatically as the supply runs out, and film production in the COVID era becomes prohibitively expensive. Movie theaters face imminent bankruptcy, so cinemagoers should take extra care to explore the “virtual cinema” offerings keeping some theaters alive via online ticket sales for streamed independent and foreign films (SF’s Roxie Cinema has one of the most active platforms).

So this year, Your Friendly Neighborhood Film Critic abandoned his theatergoing routine and stayed home. Mindless “comfort food” may have done the work of preserving sanity on the wane, but as so many in isolation longed for human contact, it was the year’s most intimate and empathetic films that nurtured the better angels of our nature, offering one way safely to extend our reach into the outside world.

The top ten films of 2020

(Author’s note: Streaming service noted when film is not currently available through multiple on-demand video services)

10. ‘Driveways’

In a year that was anything but, sometimes you just need a film that’s nice. ‘Driveways’ was that lovely warm hug of a movie this year. On paper, the tale of a single mother (Hong Chau) and her young son (Lucas Jaye) befriending the grumpily old war veteran next door (Brian Dennehey in his final film role) sounds schmaltzy and old hat. But Andrew Ahn’s gentle touch (along with the acknowledgment of tough realities) and three outstanding performances make “Driveways” the film you didn’t know you needed to put a smile on your face.

9. ‘Sound of Metal’ (Amazon Prime Video)

Riz Ahmed’s heavy-metal drummer and old hat Ruben faces a traumatic life change in the narrative filmmaking debut of screenwriter Darius Marder (“The Place Beyond the Pines”). Temporarily and tentatively reliant upon a new community, Ruben crawls through the stages of grief, achingly resisting acceptance of his “new normal,” the love offered by his girlfriend (Olivia Cooke), and the caring mentorship of a community leader (Paul Raci, in one of the year’s best supporting turns).

8. ‘Fourteen’

Writer-director Dan Sallitt explores a friendship over time in this quietly observant drama. Brooklynite Mara (Tallie Medel) enjoys a closeness with best friend Jo (Norma Kuhling), but the latter’s mental health issues and drug abuse take an ever-more-distressing toll on her and the friendship as the years slip by. Sallitt’s delicate touch and the empathic performances build a potent tragedy around a recognizable, cruelly isolating problem with no clear solution.

7. ‘City Hall’ (PBS)

The brilliant Frederick Wiseman stays true to form with his latest four and a half hour documentary film to paste up a collage of details defining an American institution — in this case, the city of Boston, Massachusetts. The film shadows Mayor Marty Walsh in his duties, but this part-commentary, part-character study based on Jessica Bruder’s 2017 nonfiction book “Nomadland” closely tracks the everyday heroic (public servants and community organizers addressing evictions and economic advancement).

6. ‘Never Rarely Sometimes Always’

Set where the reality meets the remove of a social issue, writer-director Eliza Hittman’s abortion drama takes us on the sad journey of a 17-year-old girl seeking an abortion under a patronizing patriarchy. In beautifully understated performances, Sidney Flanigan and Talia Ryder capture a friendship tested by crisis. In scenes like the one that gives the film its title, Hittman gut-punches us with the blithe bureaucracy and moral judgment that often stand in the way of a girl’s difficult personal choice.

5. ‘Lovers Rock’ (Amazon Prime Video)

Percy Bysshe Shelley called poetry “the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.” Perhaps the best compliment one can pay “Lovers Rock” is that it feels like a cinematic poem, taking a very specific, very personal experience and translating it into a cinematic language that makes it identifiable universal. This telefilm in Steve McQueen’s “Small Axe” series expands our understanding of London’s culture of West Indian immigrants circa 1980, but its swoony, sweaty depiction of romance blossoming at a reggae house party movingly reminds us of something 2020 robbed from us: communal public experiences.

4. ‘Nomadland’

Chloe Zhao wrote, edited, and produced this part-commentary, part-character study based on Jessica Bruder’s 2017 nonfiction book “Nomadland” and wins a Best Director Oscar for her commanding direction. Stainless steel and expert camerawork in this documentary take us into the slums of America, where the characters’ lived world is primary concern, and we see our society as it happens in the moment.

3. ‘Maudie’

Like Zhao, director Sarah Polley also found her subject in the hardscrabble lives of the real Jack and Maudie McLean, two outsiders who, despite their differences, find love and a home in each other. The director’s sensibility is largely absent. We’re left with the McLeans’ issues as they are, which make it rather easy to identify with Maudie’s (Sally Hawkins) determination when she finds her way of life threatened.

2. ‘Minari’

A Korean-American family comes to the Midwest at the dawn of the 20th century, in a true story capturing the American dream. Despite being made in a foreign language and the culture clash on display throughout, the film uses the Korean (and American) language of the story and the values of family to build a potent tragedy around a recognizable, cruelly isolating problem with no clear solution.

1. ‘The Father’

An aging man’s mental deterioration is the subject of his son’s story. It’s a tour de force by stars Anthony Hopkins and Olivia Colman, who deliver the performances of a lifetime in this visually stunning film that is a study of a cell’s life, death, and rebirth. It’s a reminder of how we rely on these cells for our daily life and how we can’t keep going without them.
book “Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century.” In exploring the alternative culture of Americans living out of RVs — alternative, that is, to the American Dream rat race — Zhao places professional actors (like David Strathairn) amongst real-life nomads for heightened authenticity. The soul of the film, however, resides in Frances McDormand’s leading performance, an utterly convincing study in the psychology of willful isolation.

3. ‘First Cow’

Kelly Reichardt scores again with this adaptation of Jonathan Raymond’s novel “The Half Life.” Filmmaker and novelist collaborated on the screenplay, which convincingly transports us to 19th-century frontier America while keeping one foot planted in our not-so-evolved 21st-century landscape. In dramatic terms, “First Cow” tells the story of an unlikely friendship born of an entrepreneurial business arrangement between John Magaro’s white itinerant cook and Orion Lee’s Chinese-immigrant striver, but at heart, the film serves as a meditation on capitalism, from its infancy to its late stage occupying a space between ingenuity and crime.

2. ‘Collective’

Documentary filmmaker Alexander Nanau explores two timely topics in the nonfiction film of the year: the fragility of society and the crucial role of investigative journalism. Nanau observes as a deadly nightclub fire in 2015 reshapes Romania’s political landscape: in particular, health care negligence and fraud — in shamefully overwhelmed pre-Covid hospitals — reveal the depth of governmental failure and corruption. Key to the nation’s fortunes is an unlikely last bastion of the news: a sports magazine that pivots to hard news. And the best film of 2020 goes to:

1. ‘Vitalina Varela’

There’s a transcendence to Pedro Costa’s filmmaking that earns the term “art film.” In this spinoff from Costa’s “Horse Money,” the writer-director collaborates with the titular heroine — a Cape Verdean in Lisbon — to tell her own story of seeking the truth about her late estranged husband. Varela’s mesmeric performance complements Costa’s peerless work, alive and gorgeous from its subject to its mise en scene to its painterly cinematographic interplay of shadows and light.


Runners-up


The bottom five films of 2020

5. ‘Scoob!’

This too-cynical attempt at relaunching Scooby-Doo — and, yes, a Hanna-Barbera Cinematic Universe — became Warner Brothers’ first big experiment in dumping lackluster theatrical material onto VOD (video on demand). Now residing on HBO Max, this chaotic action comedy has the dubious distinction of featuring an animated Simon Cowell hanging with Mystery, Inc.

4. ‘The Grudge’

After a dozen films, including an American trilogy, the Japanese-born “The Grudge” franchise just can’t let it go. This “sidequel” to the American trilogy films wastes a top-notch cast (Andrea Riseborough, Demian Bichir, John Cho, Jacki Weaver) on its dull daisy chain of death.

3. ‘Fantasy Island’

TV’s “Fantasy Island” returns again, this time as a big-screen horror schlockfest. Every fantasy still has a twist, but this time around with a lot more blood. A dopey idea dopily executed.

2. ‘Artemis Fowl’

Nothing that needs to work works in Kenneth Branagh’s YA fantasy adaptation: not the casting, not the script, not the direction, not the design, not the score. This movie plays like Branagh farmed out all the work so he could kick back in his trailer. And the worst film of 2020 goes to:

1. ‘The Secret: Dare to Dream’

This brand extension of the bestselling self-help franchise was arguably more than a terrible movie; it was a dangerous one. Released in the middle of a global pandemic, this spiritual romance insisted that the power of positive thinking can magically solve every problem.

Email Peter Canavese at pcanavese@bcp.org

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January 1, 2021 AlmanacNews.com The Almanac 21
The nine most memorable meals of 2020

Looking back on a fraught, but hopeful, year in dining on the Peninsula

Story and photos by Elena Kadvany

It’s hard to feel anything except deeply despondent about this year in the local food industry. Beloved restaurants closed after decades of business, and the pandemic put many waiters, cooks and dishwashers out of work. Other owners decided to go into hibernation to preserve their businesses, though they have yet to reemerge.

Looking back at the meals I ate (one too many in my car) and the stories I wrote reminded me that it was also a year of resiliency, hope and truly outstanding food made in the face of enormous obstacles. Restaurants pivoted to meal kits and became retail operations to stay alive. New restaurants defied the odds to open, and pop-ups that would normally happen in the face of coronavirus — and unfounded coronavirus fears or the inability to open during the shutdown. The owners reported that diners had come in because they heard Taste could close minutes before City Hall closed.

The restaurant specializes in Japanese curry, served over rice with cabbage, fukujinzuke (pickled vegetables) and your choice of protein, including pork and chicken katsu, chicken karaage and korokke (a fried potato croquette). I thoroughly enjoyed the tonkatsu, packaged separately from the velvety, rich curry sauce to avoid a soggy fate, from the front seat of my car. (I definitely ate more food in my car in 2020 than in any year prior, and really hope I won’t need to stash as many napkins and stain remover wipes in the glove compartment in 2021.)

Curry Hyuga, 1204 Broadway St., Burlingame; curryhyuga.com

Korean fried chicken at Maum

When Maum in Palo Alto reopened for takeout this spring, one of the menus paid homage to Korean fried chicken and KFC combo meals. I still think about the perfectly crispy-on-the-outside, juicy-on-the-inside half chicken with beef and anchovy rice, a seaweed biscuit with honey butter, pickled Korean radish and kimchi. Sadly, it’s a reminder of the restaurant experiences we lost to the pandemic. The owner of Maum later parted with the Korean restaurant’s much-lauded chefs and tried to pivot before closing for good (at least for now).

All the pizza at Pazzo

I can’t believe it took me until this year to get to Pazzo, which churns out standout wood-fired New Haven-style pizza in San Carlos. Andy Gambardella of the now-closed Gambardella’s in Menlo Park opened Pazzo in San Carlos in 2014 in homage to the pizza of his youth growing up in New Haven.

The San Marzano and baby clam pies will, guaranteed, embed themselves into your taste memory — the blistered bottoms, the hint of dried oregano and full-flavored toppings. Also, you do not want to miss the cannoli.

Pazzo, 1179 Laurel St., San Carlos; pazzosancarlos.com/home.html

Double softee with rainbow sprinkles at Mister Softee

This might have been my most joyful meal of 2020: a double softee swirled with vanilla and chocolate soft serve, dipped in rainbow sprinkles. I ate it after chasing down a Mister Softee truck, which...
made for an incredibly fun story about the beloved East Coast soft-serve company, that iconic tinkling music that triggers an almost Pavlovian response and the delightful pursuit of sugary nostalgia. I loved the impasioned responses I got from people who grew up on Mister Softee and were so excited to discover that it’s available in the Bay Area.

“Of course with the Covid there were no trips to Brooklyn this year,” one reader wrote. “I miss my family, but I had a little taste of Brooklyn thanks to your article.”

Fried chicken sandwich at Cocina Canares

We were inundated this year with fried chicken, and sandwiches in particular. My favorite of them all is the one Mel Canares makes in his backyard in South San Francisco.

A corporate chef who got laid off during the shutdown, he, like many out-of-work cooks, turned to what had previously been a side hustle — selling food out of his home — into a full-time gig. His fried chicken sandwiches are his bestseller, and for good reason. Canares double-dredges are his most successful, and for good reason. Canares double-dredges are his bestseller, and for good reason.

He’s part of the under-the-table economy of home-based food businesses across the Bay Area, which surged during the pandemic and brought us some of the most interesting eats of the year. Some of these home cooks became successful enough that they won’t go back to their pre-pandemic jobs, including Pepe of Chef Peps Kitchen in East Palo Alto, who sold enough quesabirria and tacos to purchase a food truck this fall. The fried chicken sandwich from the Cocina Canares pop-up in South San Francisco is a favorite.

The fried chicken sandwich from the Cocina Canares pop-up in South San Francisco is a favorite. The fried chicken sandwich from the Cocina Canares pop-up in South San Francisco is a favorite. The fried chicken sandwich from the Cocina Canares pop-up in South San Francisco is a favorite.

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Seared toro at Sushi Sam’s Edomata

Eating in the bustling dining room at Sushi Sam’s in downtown San Mateo in January feels like a distant memory, but I can still taste the luxurious seared toro. The hefty piece of fatty tuna is lightly seared and brushed with yuzu and sea salt, draped over perfectly cooked rice. Not to be cliche, but it really does melt in your mouth. It’s not cheap at $18 for two pieces but after this year, we all deserve a little indulgence.

Sushi Sam’s Edomata, 218 E. 3rd Ave., San Mateo; sushisams.com

Email Elena Kadvan at ekadvan@pawweekly.com
We look back with utmost appreciation and gratitude to our amazing clients and wonderful community that have made our success possible.

We look forward to a happy, healthy 2021 together. From all of us here at DeLeon Realty, Happy New Year!