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Trail Construction Discussion Raises Hackles at Parks Meeting



The image shows part of a wooded area being proposed for a trail that has put a developer at odds with the Rancho Murieta Association (RMA). The trail will run between Puerto Drive and Stonehouse Park. Courtesy photo

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG)

The debate over whether to pave or maintain a natural surface for a section of trail cutting through a wooded area intensified during the May 2 Rancho

Murieta Parks Committee's first meeting in three years.

This contested stretch is a segment of a pedestrian and bike trail aimed at linking Puerto Drive to Stonehouse Park through the Residences East subdivision, which Bob Keil and his partners are developing. Keil said that the

subdivision plan, approved by Sacramento County in 2007, originally specified a decomposed granite (DG) surface for the trail. However, following warnings from the Murieta Trail Stewardship about the potential dangers of decomposed granite, Keil began seeking approval

from the Rancho Murieta Association Board to construct a natural surface trail as far back as three years ago.

Rancho Murieta Association Board President Scott Adams reported that Keil was informed from the outset,

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CSD Updates Response to Grand Jury Report

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA (MPG) - Significant strides have been made since the release of a critical report by the Sacramento County Grand Jury in March 2023, which highlighted the loss of public trust in the Rancho Murieta Community Services District's (CSD) ability to make sound financial decisions.

A one-year progress report, uploaded to the district's website on April 18, summarizes these advancements. Written by General Manager Mimi Morris, the concise four-page update is displayed on the homepage, accompanied by direct links to both the original 14-page Grand Jury report and the CSD Board's responses from March to June 2023.

Here is a selection of the general manager's responses to the 12 findings and 13 recommendations outlined in the Grand Jury report:

- The initial finding highlighted the erosion of trust in the district's ability to make wise financial choices. The corresponding recommendation advised an upgrade of billing and accounting systems.

Morris reported that the implementation of the Tyler Technology billing system commenced in April, encountering initial challenges that have since been resolved. However, plans to transition to the Tyler accounting system were put on hold "due to concerns that adopting a new financial system before completing all pending audits could lead to accounting complications," Morris said. "Staff is confident that the current system is operating as intended, and we are planning an upgrade to improve efficiency in Fiscal Year 2025-2026."

- Three findings identified deficiencies in financial reporting, including two outstanding audits, susceptibility to fraud and the need to rebuild public trust regarding fee increases.

Continued on page 5

Rancho Murieta Photographer Celebrates Backcountry Wildlife



Paul Anderson captures a captivating photo of a mother and baby swan while photographing behind Rancho Murieta. He showcased this and other local images at the River Valley Garden Club meeting on March 27. Photo courtesy of Paul Anderson

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times
Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - From a green-eyed cormorant to a standoffish bobcat, many creatures that populate the Rancho Murieta backcountry received the recognition they deserve when wildlife photographer Paul Anderson visited the River Valley Garden Club on March 27.

Anderson is best known in the community for his social media updates on the bald eagle family residing on the north side of Lake

Clementia. His scoreboard shows the diligent parents have produced 14 eaglets since 2014, despite having to rebuild their nest twice.

Anderson's interest in the eagles was a primary catalyst for his venture into photography. He began his journey by taking an introductory camera class at McKay Photo Academy in Gold River in 2017, marking his meteoric rise as a wildlife photographer. He earned a master photography degree from the Professional Photography Association in just three years, a feat

that typically takes six years.

By 2019, he was competing with his images, earning prestigious awards and medals nationally and internationally at the highest levels.

Additionally, Anderson became an instructor with McKay Photo Academy, which organizes photography excursions domestically and internationally. Anderson has captured his winning images in diverse locations such as Antarctica, Alaska, the Canadian Northern Woods, Norway and Mongolia.

Continued on page 2

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A Northern Flicker stops by the photographer's backyard. Photos by Paul Anderson



A fawn emerges from deep grass, framed by yellow tones.



An immature cormorant with striking emerald green eyes perches on a weathered branch.



The late day sun creates dramatic lighting on a Lake Clementia eagle in this striking portrait.



A bobcat continues to hunt as Anderson and his dog, Lucy, maintain a quiet distance.



An otter enjoys a peaceful early morning at Lake Clementia.

RM Photographer Celebrates Backcountry Wildlife

Continued from page 1

Currently the manager of several car dealerships in Stockton, Anderson moved to Rancho Murieta 25 years ago for golf. He and his wife raised two children who now own their own homes in the community.

"Now I don't have time for golf," he said.

Anderson began his presentation by saying that if he only accomplished one thing that night it would be inspiring audience members to join the SOLOS (Save Our Lakes & Open Spaces) group advocating for responsible development in Rancho Murieta.

"We are in such a magnificent community, and what we have in our backyard, I am going to share with you tonight," he said.

Anderson shared stories behind some of his Rancho Murieta wildlife images as he navigated through his slide show, interspersing the narrative with light-hearted anecdotes. He described how he persuaded a bobcat that he and his dog, Lucy, weren't predators, allowing the bobcat to continue hunting. Anderson also recounted his relief after being able to go to work unscathed after a chance encounter with a skunk and never seeing a rattlesnake when he wore heavy boots with "snake guards" covering his calves.

"But when I go out there for a quick half



Paul Anderson points out an eaglet that is barely visible in its nest. Photo by Gail Bullen

hour in my tennis shoes, I see them all the time," he said.

Anderson presented many images of the Rancho Murieta Bald Eagles, documenting everything from their courtship rituals to the feeding of their loudly clamoring eaglets. He noted that the local eagles are half the size of those in Alaska and Washington, likely because they need less fat for insulation.

He also touched on a controversy about the eagle nest coming down two years in a row between August and October 1 in 2021 and 2022, showing a photo of vehicle tracks coming up to the tree involved. Despite these challenges, the eagles

managed to rebuild their nest, although the latest one is secured to a dead or dying tree limb.

Highlighting the legal ramifications of disturbing these birds, Anderson displayed a slide about the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. The act protects against disruption of any breeding, feeding or shelter habits, with penalties reaching up to \$100,000 and a year in prison for the first offense.

"So, it's pretty serious," he said.

Anderson also showed many striking images of the community's wild swans, although it isn't a good year for them.

"I just counted five on the lake when

were normally have 20 to 30," he said.

Anderson described the cygnets as "the stars of the swans" because they are so much fun and have so much personality. However, capturing images of the young swans without their protective parents is challenging. The juveniles are fond of riding on their mother's back.

Among the most vivid photographs was one taken a few years ago in Anderson's backyard, featuring a Northern Flicker in a bush.

"The berries haven't been that same color since I took that picture," Anderson said.

Anderson showcased a diverse range of other wildlife, from cormorants and pelicans to kites and Canadian Geese. He also captured images of a red-winged blackbird, an osprey, a salmon, a beaver, a coyote, an otter and a convoy of little ducks with brown beaks.

The presentation concluded with some award-winning images that included a Kodiak bear eating a salmon and two elephants sparring with their tusks. But the image that garnered the most acclaim featured a Mongolian hunter galloping across the grasslands with a giant eagle by his side. It won a gold medal this year in an international competition.

Anderson's photographs are available for viewing on his Facebook page and Instagram account. ★

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Diana Fox, left, admires a wall hanging that her daughter and son-in-law, Ashley and Aaron Boyer, hope to sell at her carport sale on Garcia Way.



Eva McMullen asks vendor Traci Albee about a glass item during her visit to the annual Murieta Village Trash and Treasure Sale on April 27. The sale took place outdoors near the clubhouse and at various carports. Photos by Gail Bullen

Village Trash and Treasure Sale Lives up to its Name

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - The old adage that “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure” was proven again when the Murieta Village Association held its annual Trash and Treasure Sale on April 27.

Jackie VanBuskirk organized the event. “I’m pleased it went as well as it did and everyone seemed to be selling,” she said. “The weather also was perfect, given the pouring rain we had the day before.”

The sale had two components. VanBuskirk rented out 15 tables to vendors who showcased their goods in the traditional location outside the clubhouse. Simultaneously, across the village, a dozen residents displayed their offerings on their driveways and carports.

The table rentals generated \$425, while Nancy Warrington, Social Committee chair, raised an additional \$128 by selling donated items. All proceeds were directed into the committee treasury to fund memorial services within the village following a resident’s passing.

The vendors at the clubhouse included Rancho Murieta residents living inside the gates who can’t host their own garage sales due to association rules.

Among them was Berniece Jones, a first-time vendor. Jones, a frequent attendee of past sales, looks for Christmas

decorations, particularly sleighs. “Now I’m selling them because I can’t afford to store them,” Jones said.

Deb Clemens, who lives in the village, showcased her handcrafted jewelry at the sale. She said being a vendor was wonderful.

“Everybody is so friendly and nice, so it makes for a good experience, even if they aren’t buying anything,” Clemens said.

Bill Piva, a regular attendee of the sale, shared his most memorable bargain from two years ago: a crystal pelican he purchased for \$5.

“It turned out to be worth \$110 when I checked online,” Piva said. “I felt so bad about the price difference and considered returning to give them more money because they were so sweet.”

Village resident Patti Sewall observed a decrease in the number of browsers at her carport sale this year compared to previous years. Despite the lower turnout, Sewall said, there was an increase in purchases.

Dan Dilbeck reminisced about the enjoyment he and his wife, Kim, found in leisurely cruising through the village on their golf cart, admiring sales.

“It was so relaxing and calming,” he said.

However, this year, Dilbeck’s wife rented a table at the clubhouse to sell some of their belongings, leaving him to browse the other sales alone. ★



Ray Trujillo beams with delight as he shows off a doll he bought for his granddaughter at the sale.



Vendor Deb Clemens says renting a table is worth it for the social interaction, even if she doesn't sell much jewelry.

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Trail Construction Discussion Raises Hackles

Continued from page 1

and reiterated during recent negotiations, that the board would only approve a Class 1 trail with a 12-foot wide paved surface and designated shoulders, as outlined in a 2003 Parks Agreement.

The Parks Committee, responsible for final decisions regarding parks and trails within the community, comprises five members. Two represent the Rancho Murieta Association Board, Adams and director John Van Doren; two represent the development community, Keil and Tony Velez, who is affiliated with the investment firm developing the proposed Rancho North subdivision; and one serves as a tie-breaker representing the Rancho Murieta Community Services District Board, director Linda Butler. The Parks Committee has not convened since Feb. 18, 2021. Keil requested the latest meeting after a previous attempt was halted by Rancho Murieta Association.

Over the past year, Keil has met about six times with Adams, Rancho Murieta Association General Manager Ron Hart and an occasional Rancho Murieta Association director, which culminated with a partial compromise discussed at the April 16 board meeting.

Keil presented two maps during the April meeting. One depicted Unit 1, comprising 68 lots, which is not wooded. The second map illustrated Unit 2, consisting of 130 lots, with a wooded area within the green open space.

Both Keil and Adams reported reaching a compromise for a paved trail in Unit 1, prompted by separate planning by the Community Services District.

This agreement arose after the district advised that a road was necessary to access sewers within the subdivision. Keil agreed to relocate his proposed natural surface trail to the access road, and Rancho Murieta Association consented to this arrangement, despite the Community Services District's paved road being only 10 feet wide.

However in Unit 2, the sewer road could provide only a partial compromise. Keil's Unit 2 showed a shortening of the trail because it would be connected to that paved road.

However, this left a wooded section of the trail accessed off Tierra Drive in dispute, with Keil arguing that paving it would cause significant damage to numerous trees.



Resident Mary Jane Ison favors a natural surface on the trail behind her property. Photos by Gail Bullen

One of Adams' counterarguments was that a paved trail accessible to all would offer an alternative to the heavily traveled Puerto Drive, which would only become more congested with further development.

Ultimately, Adams postponed the discussion regarding the Unit 2 trail during the board meeting.

However, at Keil's request, the matter was added to the agenda for the upcoming Parks Committee meeting.

The exchanges during the May 2 parks meeting grew tense as both sides elaborated on their arguments and countered claims regarding the wooded section of the trail. By the meeting's end, they appeared to be even further apart than at the outset.

Adams initiated the meeting by delineating early governing documents mandating developers to construct pedestrian and bike trails.

Following completion, these trails must be deeded to Rancho Murieta Association for community-wide use, irrespective of whether the association annexes the subdivision.

When the Unit 2 trail came up on the agenda, Hart emphasized the board's fiduciary duty to adhere to the parameters set forth in the governing documents. He also noted that the Parks Committee had previously voted on a Rancho Murieta Association conceptual map in 2018, which depicted a traditional asphalt trail within the subdivision. Additionally, Hart said that negotiations with Keil regarding the trail had been ongoing for a year.

Keil explained that any departure from the trail layout specified in the 2007 environmental impact report necessitates undergoing an amendment process at the county level, which is both costly and time-consuming.

To facilitate this process, they enlisted the expertise of an arborist and gathered data on the impacts of paving. Keil argued that the proposed "golf cart super highway" advocated by Rancho Murieta

Association would cause significant harm to the trees and landscape.

Keil said the natural trail was strategically positioned to avoid the need for tree removal and largely kept away from existing residences.

However, he clarified that if the committee approves the trail, adjustments could be made within certain parameters, ensuring that rock outcroppings, cultural features and trees remain undisturbed.

Adams dismissed Keil's concern about golf carts as a "red herring," asserting that once the trail is approved, the board will deliberate on whether to permit golf cart usage or to restrict access, as was the case with the Chesbro Trail.

Contrary to past practices of avoiding dialogue with developers, Adams said that he insisted this board should engage in discussions with them.

He also noted that the previous owner of Keil's property had agreed to the terms of the 2003 Parks Agreement, which included provisions for a paved trail in the Residences subdivision. Adams reiterated that Keil had been informed about this agreement from the outset.

Adams directed photos of natural trails submitted by Keil to be shown on an overhead monitor. After highlighting the hazards posed by the rocks, Adams said the board was the only thing standing between "garbage" and a proper trail consistent with ones built over the past 20 years.

Keil later requested that his sample pictures showcasing a visually appealing trail be projected. "Which ones are those?" Adams inquired.

The board president highlighted that Rancho Murieta Association has its own trail expert who emphasized, "This is one of the most, if not the most important trail in Rancho Murieta." This assertion stems from the belief that paving the trail would offer a safe alternative to Puerto Drive for all users, including residents pushing



Roger Formanek supports the Rancho Murieta Association requirement for an asphalt trail.

strollers.

Shifting focus, Adams mentioned a note handed to him by Keil during a Community Services District meeting, which contradicted Keil's assertions regarding wildlife and tree conservation. "Would you consider accepting an easement for the trail and a payment? Then you could get approval from the county?"

Keil expressed no qualms about the note and saw it as a compelling argument, considering Rancho Murieta Association's greater environmental latitude compared to his own constraints. He argued that Rancho Murieta Association holds the power to impede his development.

Keil emphasized the need for Rancho Murieta Association approval of the trail to facilitate the submission of a transportation management plan, a prerequisite for obtaining building permits by November. When Adams inquired about the expected approval timeframe, Keil estimated it would take approximately 60 days.

Adams also questioned Keil about the feasibility

of a six-foot trail accommodating a fire truck. Keil asserted that he wasn't accountable for fire truck access, adding, "I don't believe any of the trails are."

Hart expressed his offense at some of Keil's assertions, noting that there were multiple methods available to mitigate the impact of paving the trail. He also mentioned Keil's failure to comply with their reasonable request for a topographic map during negotiations.

"You would have people believe that we weren't willing to work with you and that's not true," Hart added.

In reference to the private discussions, Keil said he had requested a Parks Committee meeting much earlier to ensure that the trail discussion took place in a public forum rather than being deliberated behind closed doors.

"Do you hear all the hyperbole here?" Adams responded.

Seven audience members provided comments, including Mary Jane Ison and John Randolph, both expressing a preference for a natural-surface trail. Ison noted that her residence backs up to the

subdivision.

Carol Anderson Ward, the majority investor in the proposed Rancho North development comprising 697 lots, advocated for natural trails. Ward suggested that Rancho Murieta Association should take responsibility for ensuring the safety of children traveling to the ballpark, rather than placing the burden solely on the developer.

"We need help getting houses built here so we can support our golf courses, so we can bring in a pool and a clubhouse and other amenities so there are things for kids to do," Ward said.

John Merchant, who described himself as a poster child for natural trails, said he favors paving the trail, citing safety concerns as his primary reason.

Roger Formanek also appeared to lean toward supporting paving. "When a developer purchases property, they are acquiring an opportunity for development, not a guarantee," he remarked.

Formanek emphasized that it wasn't his responsibility if a developer chose to forego a paved path due to cost considerations.

In other business, the committee voted 5:0 to approve the compromise regarding Unit 1 trail. They also voted unanimously to pay \$13,900 for a topographical survey at the Escuela park site and to reimburse Rancho Murieta Association \$8,500 for a study for a community center that has since been put on hold.

The Parks Fund balance stood at \$301,000 before the meeting. ★



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COMMUNITY BRIEFS

Spray Park to Open Saturday, May 18

The Summerfest Spray Park at Riverside Park will open for the summer on Saturday, May 18 with a celebration from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. The Rancho Murieta Association Recreation Committee will serve hot dogs, cotton candy, popcorn and snow cones.

ETC Slates Free Kick-off May 19

Entertainment, Theatre & Culture for Rancho Murieta has slated its free kick-off event from 3 to 5 p.m. Sunday, May 19 at the Rancho Murieta Country Club. Enjoy music, food

tasting, wine, beer and champagne. Credit cards will be accepted for membership and tickets at this event only.

Water Plan Town Hall Meeting May 30

Join the Rancho Murieta Community Services District board members, staff and the Integrated Water Master Plan consulting team at a town hall meeting to learn about and provide input on the master plan at 6 p.m. Thursday, May 30 at the Rancho Murieta County Club. The district's water supply and demand, along with the projected impacts of climate change on the

supply, will be reviewed. The district plans to hold more public meetings as the master plan is developed. More about the plan is on the district's website at ranchomurieta.com/water-master-plan/.

ETC Offers Essay Contest

Entertainment, Theatre and Culture (ETC) for the Rancho Murieta Community is sponsoring its annual Scholarship Essay Contest for graduating high school seniors who live in Rancho Murieta North or South. The winner of the contest will receive a \$2,000 scholarship. Essays must

be 550 to 600 words and entries must be postmarked by May 30. Application form with contest rules is available at the Rancho Murieta Association Building or by request to Stephanie Stanislaus, ETC Philanthropy Chair at stephslaus2@ranchomurieta.org. For additional information, call Stanislaus at 916-354-0901.

Family Movie Night in Rancho Murieta

The Family Movie Nights Series will be held at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church at 14673 Cantova Way in Rancho Murieta. Mark your calendars for Fridays, May 31,

June 28 and July 26. Doors open at 5:15 p.m. Delicious food will be served beginning at 5:30 p.m., so there's no need to rush dinner. The movie magic begins at 6 p.m. Kids are welcome to wear pajamas and bring snuggle essentials. This is a family affair, so no drop-offs.

Although it is free, tickets are required. Sign up on Eventbrite at tinyurl.com/4spzywmp. The sponsors are the church, The Grove Youth Ministry, the Kiwanis Club of Rancho Murieta, Entertainment, Theatre & Culture for Rancho Murieta (ETC), and Knights of Columbus.

Women's Club's Bubbles & Chocolate

Join the Rancho Murieta Women's Club for a program on Bubbles and Chocolate pairings, with Tracey Berkner of Taste Restaurant. On May 22, after enjoying a charcuterie appetizer, attendees will choose a mixed green salad topped with grilled chicken or salmon and, of course, a dessert of specialty chocolates paired with Bubbles. The cost is \$35 for members and \$40 for nonmembers. For more information, contact Cindy Shamrock at 916-354-1918 or Barbara Armstrong at 916-541-1884. ★

CSD Updates Response to Grand Jury Report

Continued from page 1

The recommendations included completing the audits, recruiting and training competent personnel, generating monthly accounts payable listings, monitoring invoices and creating manuals outlining accounting protocols.

Morris reported the district had collaborated extensively with auditors to finalize the 2020-21 audit by late February 2024. She anticipates the completion of audits for 2021-22 and 2022-23 before January 2025.

Qualified accounting staff, including Morris and Director of Finance and Administration Mark Matulich, a CPA, have been recruited by the district. The new team has "strong financial management skills to ensure proper accounting procedures are established and followed to guarantee the integrity of the accounting data," Morris said.

Positive Pay, a system guaranteeing the clearance of only verified payments from district accounts, has been implemented. Additionally, monthly budget-to-actual reports on revenues and expenditures are generated and presented at all board meetings.

• Three findings highlighted deficiencies in staff management, turnover rates and the erosion of institutionalized accounting expertise, which have impeded district operations. Recommendations included enhanced and mandatory training, a heightened level of scrutiny for adverse personnel actions, and quarterly reports addressing staff development and concerns.

"The district agrees that sound human resources management is important for organization effectiveness and has put many legacy HR (human resources) issues behind it," Morris said. "The district has made great strides in improving employee morale in the last year."

Nonetheless, the district still needs to implement a policy ensuring that impartial persons not directly involved in the chain of command review adverse actions against employees to guarantee the fair and consistent application of disciplinary measures, Morris said.

She includes an update about staff development in her monthly report to the board.

• Two findings focused on reserve funds designated for infrastructure repair and

replacement.

The grand jury report highlighted the absence of an updated Capital Reserve Policy and a \$10 million shortfall in reserves, both posing threats to the district's financial stability. The report recommended that the board amend its existing policy to delineate specific funding targets for each capital asset and establish adequate fees to address infrastructure requirements (for water, sewer and drainage).

"Staff is updating the 2012 District Reserve Policy to more accurately define the current reserve 'buckets' and to reflect the need for reserves that fully cover anticipated future capital outlay needs," Morris said. "A 20-year capital improvement plan study is underway with recommendations expected by May of 2024."

Morris further noted the board's acknowledgment of the vital importance of service fees in meeting both current operational expenses and long-term infrastructure demands, which was reflected in both the 2023-24 budget and the proposed 2024-25 budget.

• Another finding reported that relying on property taxes to subsidize escalating

security expenses without adjusting security fees had endangered the district's financial stability. The recommendation urged the district to limit funding to a level supported by resident fees (Measure J taxes) and allocate all property taxes to reserves.

Morris reported that the security budget was trimmed by \$250,000 in the 2023/24 fiscal year, resulting in only \$50,000 in property taxes being necessary for supplementation.

Furthermore, recent staff adjustments reallocated administrative overhead previously assigned to security, eliminating the need for property tax reliance. With current staffing levels for patrol and gate operations, the existing program operates with a surplus. However, a recent wage increase negotiated by the security employee union will surpass the 2% increase in security taxes authorized by Measure J in 1998.

"The district is now focused on how to determine what level of security services can be provided within available security resources and is working with the Rancho Murieta Association (RMA) to map out security levels," Morris said. ★

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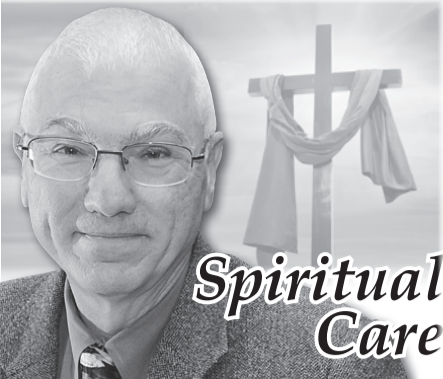
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BY NORRIS BURKES

Religious Fashion Not God's Style

I sometimes receive emails from readers telling me they love my columns so much they read them to their Bible study group. It's a nice compliment, but on the other hand, I work hard to make this column about spirituality in everyday life, not just Sunday school life.

I want it to appeal to those who are unconnected or disconnected to church. And because of that I encourage editors to place me on the community pages or the Living section and off the church page.

And please, keep me as far as possible from the fashion pages. I'm definitely not a fashionable guy.

But if I was writing a fashion column, I'd tell you about my trip last week through the St. Louis airport where I saw men of various ages dressed in, well, I-don't-know-what.

I saw a young man with trousers riding low enough to qualify him for entrance into the Plumbers Union. I saw old men wearing pants high enough to double as a face mask. And of course, more than enough middle-aged men wearing sweatpants to accommodate their growing bellies.

The fashion didn't improve much on the

plane, where I sat across from a girl with fingernails painted traffic-cone orange. She was wired to her phone and didn't notice me.

With so many fashion-challenged children of God, airport crowds do make a good segue. Cue Bible study.

That's because the airport crowd reminded me of the one Jesus likely encountered as he walked into a city looking to recruit a Band of Brothers who would change the world.

Like me, he was a people-watcher, just not as smug as me. Go figure.

Unlike me, he had a keen eye for the quality of the soul over the quality of the fabric, the cut of a man's character over the cut of his shirt.

This is the Jesus used to quickly single out an eager young recruit named Phillip who followed him without so much as blinking.

Exhilarated at being chosen, Phil found his bud, Nathaniel, and begged him to come and meet the teacher from Nazareth.

"Nazareth?" Nat rightly exclaimed, "You've got to be kidding."

No, Phil wasn't kidding.

"Come see for yourself," he challenged.

Upon meeting Nathaniel, Jesus quickly pronounced, "Now, here's the real deal. Not a false bone in his body."

Nat, not easily moved by flattery, asked, "Where'd you get that idea? You don't know me."

Nat was partially right. The two had never been formally introduced, but Jesus had observed Nathaniel on several occasions where he sat under a fig tree, deep in thought.

It was obvious to Jesus that there was something different about Nat.

What was it?

The best translation of the scripture says that Nat was a man "without guile." That means he didn't try to

hide who he was. He didn't demonstrate any pretense in his choice of clothing, friends or mannerisms.

"Why not?" you ask.

Well, it's not because he was intrinsically happy with who he was. He knew he was not completely accessorized, so he was willing to undertake a fearless inventory of his soul closet.

And I think it was his self-awareness

about truly lacking something that made him a prime candidate on the first-round draft pick for a disciple.

In that moment, Nathaniel discovered the most profound truth of all: God is always able to pick us out of the crowd. But he sees us best when we lay aside our pretense and all the religious fashion that goes with it.

Next week, I return to regular programming in the everyday life sections.

And, just to be clear, if this were a fashion column, I surely wouldn't be the author.

Readers: I return to Honduras next month to help establish the 86th library for Chispa Project. As of this date, the library isn't fully funded.

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Garden Club Awards Horticultural Scholarships

By Gail Bullen
River Valley Times Reporter

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - The epitome of why the River Valley Garden Club works so hard on its fundraisers was evident when the group met at the RMA Building on April 23.

The reasons manifested as three horticultural students who were being awarded \$1,000 scholarships. Erin Harris and Stephanie Estrada, students at American River College (ARC), along with Britney Carpenter from Cosumnes River College (CRC), attended the meeting accompanied by enthusiastic family members.

Margaret Watson Hopkins, chair of this year's scholarship committee, took a moment to acknowledge her team, comprising Cathy Critz, Eileen Shepherd and Karen Bengard, before introducing the scholarship recipients.

"I'm just tickled pink to be able to present these scholarships," she said. "The main focus of what we do is not only provide beauty but to help others provide beauty."

The club funds its annual scholarships and community grants through the sale of raffle tickets at each meeting and by hosting plant sales during the summer months, with the inaugural event being the May 11 plant extravaganza.

Earlier this year, the club allocated \$500 community grants to five organizations, including the



Three horticulture students show off their \$1,000 scholarship checks at the April 23 meeting of the River Valley Garden Club. From left, they are Erin Harris, Britney Carpenter and Stephanie Estrada. Photo by Gail Bullen

Murieta Trail Stewardship and a gardening program catering to youngsters at Pioneer Elementary School in Somerset.

"Now we are giving out three scholarships to students at American River College to help them further their students in horticulture, in landscape design, in agriculture and research," Watson Hopkins told the audience.

Erin Harris

ARC student Harris approached the podium first. Her horticultural journey began when the family relocated to a property with ample land when her three children, now aged 6, 8 and 10, were babies. Always passionate about gardening, Harris embarked on transforming her front yard, revamping the backyard and removing lifeless trees. During the pandemic, she found herself assisting friends with

their landscape designs, initially as a hobby.

The epiphany struck her while pruning a tree branch from her rooftop. "As I sawed away, I thought I should do this as a living. This brings me a lot of joy," she said.

Harris, with a background in media communications, utilized her skills in fundraising before transitioning to full-time motherhood. Surprisingly, she had never enrolled in a single class related to plants.

When Harris embarked on the ARC horticultural program, her goal was to become a landscape designer. Reflecting on her journey, she said, "I actually started taking on clients and doing design work."

However, this path led her to the realization she needed to learn more about trees. Currently pursuing certification as an

arborist, she acknowledges its importance, especially as one of her clients requires landscaping around a diseased tree.

As Harris establishes her burgeoning design business and certifies as an arborist, the timely support from the garden club scholarship holds profound significance for her family.

"Recently, we received the news that one of our children is experiencing hearing loss," she said.

With significant medical procedures and rehabilitation looming ahead, Harris told the membership that she was thankful and honored she had been selected for a scholarship.

Britney Carpenter

When Carpenter was invited to share a few words, she expressed a blend of gratitude and nervousness. Her fascination with horticulture blossomed during her three years at Green Acres, coupled with invaluable guidance from Professor Dave Andrews at CRC.

In her scholarship application, Carpenter outlined her ambition to pursue a transfer to a four-year institution for post-associate degree completion. She sees herself as a conscientious landscape architect, prioritizing ecological sustainability and water conservation.

Moreover, Carpenter envisions contributing to community enhancement by challenging conventional landscaping norms.

"Landscapes can be more than just the typical products found at mainstream nurseries," she said. "Native drought-tolerant plants can be just as beautiful when sustainability is considered."

Carlos Valez, manager of Green Acres Nursery in Elk Grove, commended Carpenter's stellar work ethic in his letter of recommendation. "Her extensive plan knowledge is a resource we use for the benefit of our customers, and over the years, she had taken a larger role in teaching others the things she had learned," he said.

Stephanie Estrada

Despite growing up immersed in the family garden and cultivating small crops, it wasn't until enrolling at ARC in 2019 that Estrada discovered her passion for horticulture. When the pandemic disrupted her academic pursuits, she temporarily shifted gears, securing employment as a painter.

However, a serious injury prompted her return to ARC to resume her studies.

With just a year left to complete her associate degree, Estrada remains undecided about her future educational endeavors, though she expresses a keen interest in delving deeper into the scientific aspects of agriculture.

"My goals are to graduate and to have my own business and to be able to teach others about how amazing and important agriculture is," she said. ★

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For the fifth year in a row, beautifully screen-printed banners are honoring the community's 2024 high school graduates. In the photo on the far left, three paired flags are mounted on light standards along Murieta Parkway across from the Rancho Murieta Association Building. In the photo near left, a close-up shows the detail in the flags for two seniors. The flags will remain aloft until the end of May. Photos by Gail Bullen



GOLF SCORES

144 Players Golf Nine Holes at 'Margaritas and Mulligans'



Front-nine winning team of Terry Wilder-Unruh and Julie Cosgrove (back row), Jacqueline Gray and Judy Benjamin (front row)



Players warm up on the range prior to tee time in the perfect spring weather. Photos courtesy of RMCC Niner Women's Golf Group



Committee Chair Andrea Johnson with some of the 30 raffle baskets.



Co-Captain and Invitational Chair Cathy Niley with Captain Pamela O'Hern.



Back-nine winning team of Denise Mascaro, Sharon Lawin, Carol Kennobbie and Dixie Gold.

By Nancy Clevenger

RANCHO MURIETA, CA (MPG) - The Niner's Women's Golf Club recently held its Golf Invitational at Rancho Murieta Country Club (RMCC). A full field of 144 women showed up for the event, representing 24 different clubs from around the Northern California region, ready to play nine holes of golf at the Rancho Murieta facility.

A perfect spring day added to the festivities set by the theme of "Margaritas and Mulligans." Both the front and back nine holes of RMCC's North Course were filled with players. The well-manicured fairways and greens allowed for great shots

and great scores by the ladies.

A Texas Scramble format was played, with all players adding their best shot to the stroke count on each hole. The low-net score winning team on the front nine of the North Course was a scalding 24, shot by the team of Judy Benjamin, Julie Cosgrove, Jacqueline Gray and Terry Wilder-Unruh. The team consisting of Dixie Gold, Carol Kennobbie, Sharon Lawin and Denise Mascaro burned up the back nine with a blazing score of 22.

The ladies began the day with a buffet of assemble-your-own breakfast burritos before hitting the links. The delicious meal provided the nourishment needed,

especially for guests Shari Edwards and Cindy Pederson, who landed their ball closest to the pin on a designated par 3. Edwards landed her ball 9 feet, 9 inches from the cup on Hole 12 while Pederson landed hers 11 feet, 5 inches from the pin on Hole 2. RMCC member Patty Harris' ball rolled to 17 feet, 9 inches from the hole. Prizes were awarded to all of these golfers.

At the luncheon of taco salad and margaritas, Co-Captain and Invitational Chair Cathy Niley announced the winners of the over 30 raffle baskets, all of which were donated by Niner members. Additionally, Niley honored former Niner captain

Marie Dunajski, the player who has been a member for the longest period of time, having joined in 1998. Additionally, Sally Montagne, 94, was honored for her continued golfing excellence.

The Niner Invitational is an annual event hosted by members of the RMCC Niner Women's Golf Group. It is attended by any member of Women's Nine Hole Golf Association of Northern California (WNHGA).

Ladies who are golfing members of RMCC have the opportunity to join this casually competitive and friendly group by contacting Pamela O'Hern at 209-598-1160 or plogern@sbcglobal.net. ★

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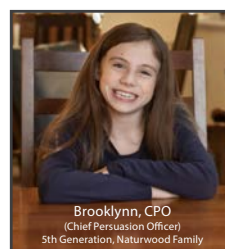


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