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Grand Opening held for Hiram Johnson High's new stadium

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Sacramento County spokesperson provides COVID-19 update

By Lance Armstrong
vcneditor@gmail.com

With the state and county's recent termination of their COVID-19 state of emergency declarations, Samantha Mott, a Sacramento County health department spokesperson, provided an update regarding COVID-19 in this county.

In an interview with this paper, Mott recognized the end of the county's COVID-19 state of emergency.

"It coincides with the ending of the state emergency declaration, and in anticipation of the federal government ending their emergency declaration (on May 11), as well," she said.

"Over the last six months or so, probably longer than that, actually, we have really been following state guidelines. We have not had a public health order in place for some time now. We've been following state public health orders."

To show the progress that Sacramento County experienced with COVID-19 in the past year, Mott noted that on March 1, 2022, the seven-day average COVID-19 case rate in the county was 9.5 people per every 100,000 residents, compared to the latest March 1 update, which shows a case rate of 7.6 per 100,000.

"So, our case rate has gone down a bit compared to last year," she said. "And the reality is that there are vaccines available now, there are boosters available now. I think folks are far more educated around how to protect themselves from (COVID-19).

"You know, the ending of the public health emergency doesn't mean that COVID(-19) is going away. It simply means that (Sacramento County) Public Health is now monitoring COVID-19 the way they do with other infectious diseases. We, for example, monitor flu every year. Every year, it's a different strain of flu."

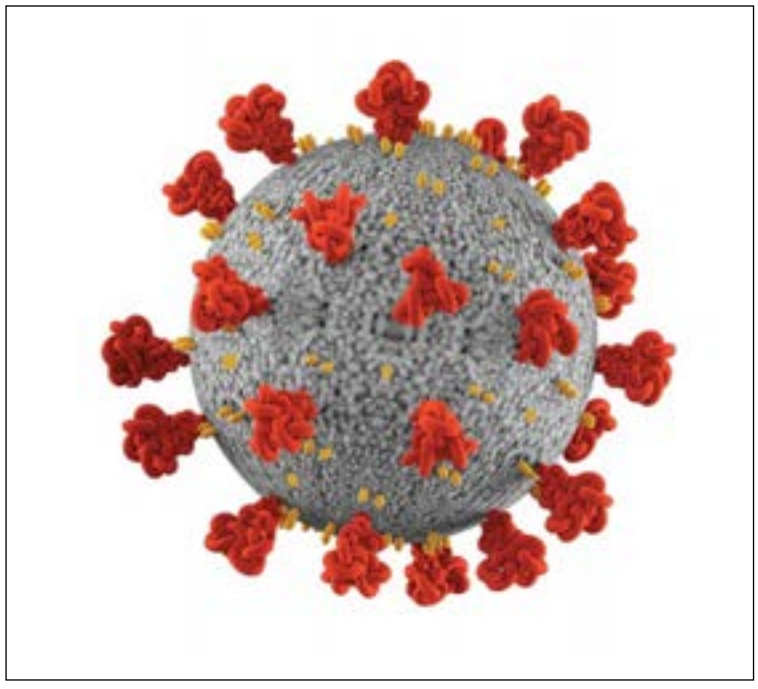


Photo courtesy of Shutterstock

Mott additionally spoke about the topic of masks.

"We currently, locally, do not have any masking orders in place," she said. "We have been following the state guidelines. I believe they still have some masking orders for specific situations in place at a state level."

The California Department of Public Health announced on March 3 that beginning on April 3, masks would no longer be required in indoor high-risk and health care settings.

However, regardless of COVID-19 community levels, CDPH recommends:

Wearing a mask around others if you have respiratory symptoms, such as a cough, a runny nose and/or a sore throat; the consideration of wearing a mask in indoor areas of public transportation, such as in airplanes, trains, buses and ferries, and transportation hubs, such as airports, stations and seaports; and wearing a mask if you have had significant exposure to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19.

Mott mentioned that Sacramento County Public Health encourages people to continue taking steps to prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses.

"That includes staying up to date on vaccinations, testing for COVID-19, if they have symptoms, and staying in contact with health care providers about treatments, if you do test positive for COVID-19," she said.

"Just a reminder, vulnerable people, including those who are at greater risk for severe illness, should consider wearing a mask indoor(s) and (in) public places."

As for Sacramento County's COVID-19 dashboard reports, Mott noted that with the ending of the county's state of emergency, that dashboard will no longer be updated. The final update was released on March 1.

"Folks can find out the most up-to-date information – post-March 1 – on the California Department of Public Health('s) 'Tracking COVID-19 in California' dashboard," she said.

Available through this online resource is COVID-19-related data for each of California's 58 counties, as well combined information for the entire state.

The link for the state's online dashboard is www.COVID19.ca.gov/State-Dashboard.

Mott also provided details about COVID-19 testing sites, mentioning that underutilized state-funded testing sites would begin to wind down their operations in the coming months.

"It will depend on the utilization, so some of them will stay open for some time," she said. "But if they're being underutilized, the state has indicated that they will wind down operations of some of those testing sites."

According to the county's website, no dates for such closures have been announced.

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Cover by:
Photos courtesy of Hiram Johnson High School

Grand opening held for Hiram Johnson High's new stadium

By Joseph Mello, Gia Cardiel and Liam McGurk
Hiram Johnson High School students



Photos courtesy of Hiram Johnson High School

The new stadium includes bleachers for home and visiting crowds, a press box, snack bars, and bathrooms. There are also areas for tailgating.

Hiram Johnson High School has peppered the headlines this year for all the right reasons. From the record-breaking season of junior quarterback Marino Fragata to the Wide Open Walls murals that now adorn the once-vacant halls, the city can't seem to get enough of its new campus. And adding to its hallmark year was the recent opening of Johnson's new athletic stadium.

The facility includes bleachers for home and visiting crowds, a press box, snack bars, and bathrooms. There are also areas for tailgating.

Friday, March 17 marked the historic occasion on campus: the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new stadium – an event that brought out many of the Sacramento Unified School District's (SCUSD) A-listers.

The unveiling of the new athletic facilities has been years in the making, with collaborators including Sacramento City Unified School District Superintendent Jorge Aguilar, Hiram Johnson Principal Garrett Kirkland, Johnson High athletic director Nathan Oltmanns, the SCUSD Board of Education, Johnson's Parent Teacher Student Association President Rich Vasquez, and community members who have attended meetings to share their vision.

Catching a break from the recent Northern California downpour, the sun was shining on the event, which kicked off with a performance by the school's band, under the direction of David Robinson. Along with the cheer team and the Associated Student Body, the outstanding drum line striped the entrance to the campus and welcomed the crowds of students, alumni, parents, media and SCUSD dignitaries.

The decorated Hiram Johnson color guard ben-

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Stadium

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efited from a slight breeze as the nation's red, white and blue proudly waved next to California's Bear Flag.

Those attractions were followed by speeches from Kirkland, Aguilar, SCUSD Board President Chinua Rhodes, and district board members Jasjit Singh and Lavinia Grace Phillips. Each emphasized how this event was a transformative moment for the campus, school community, and the neighborhood surrounding 65th Street.



The Hiram Johnson cheerleaders are pictured inside the school's new athletic stadium.

In his speech, Aguilar stressed the need to "vigilantly deal with inequities and level the playing field."

"I recall when Hiram John-

See STADIUM on page 5



Superintendent Jorge Aguilar speaks at the March 17 event. He is a strong supporter of Hiram Johnson High School and is proud of its community and leadership.



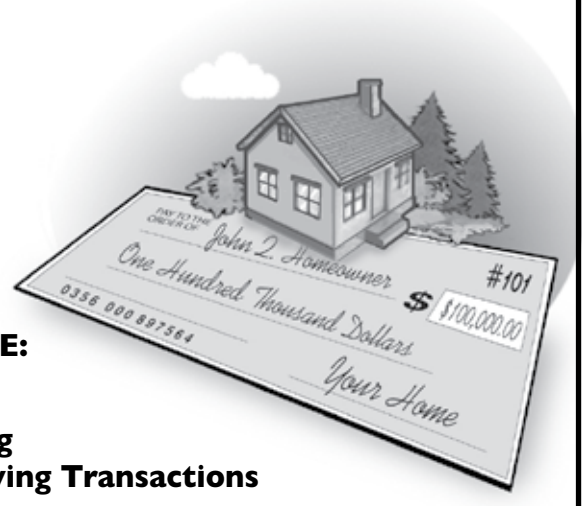
Hiram Johnson's varsity quarterback, Marino Fragata, a junior at the school, said that he is looking forward to Senior Night at the new stadium. "It's going to go crazy," he said.

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Johnson Associated Student Body students show their spirit and welcome guests to the stadium grand opening event, which they helped organize.



Hiram Johnson students are shown with artist Shane Grammer during the week of murals, which was sponsored by Wide Open Walls.

Stadium

Continued from page 4

son students came to a board meeting and reminded me of that core value," he said. "What is happening across this school...this is what transformational leadership looks like."

Hiram Johnson senior Cristian Andrade was in attendance and was overwhelmed with the moment.

"I'm glad the community and future Warriors will be able to feel a sense of pride in their school," he said.

There has been a palpable buzz across the campus in 2023, as students and staff recognize the investment in school culture and community involvement. Through continued support, the students understand the expectations have been lifted and they are grateful they have been given the opportunity to exceed them.


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Broadway business operators, county health officer speak about current status of COVID-19

By Lance Armstrong
vcneditor@gmail.com

Several Broadway business operators shared their thoughts on the current status of COVID-19 with this paper on March 11 – the three-year anniversary of the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic.

Eleven days earlier, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors voted to end the local COVID-19 state of emergency. That decision aligned with California's termination of its COVID-19 state of emergency, which also ended on Feb. 28.

Sacramento County Public Health Officer Dr. Olivia Kasirye explained the significance of the county's order.

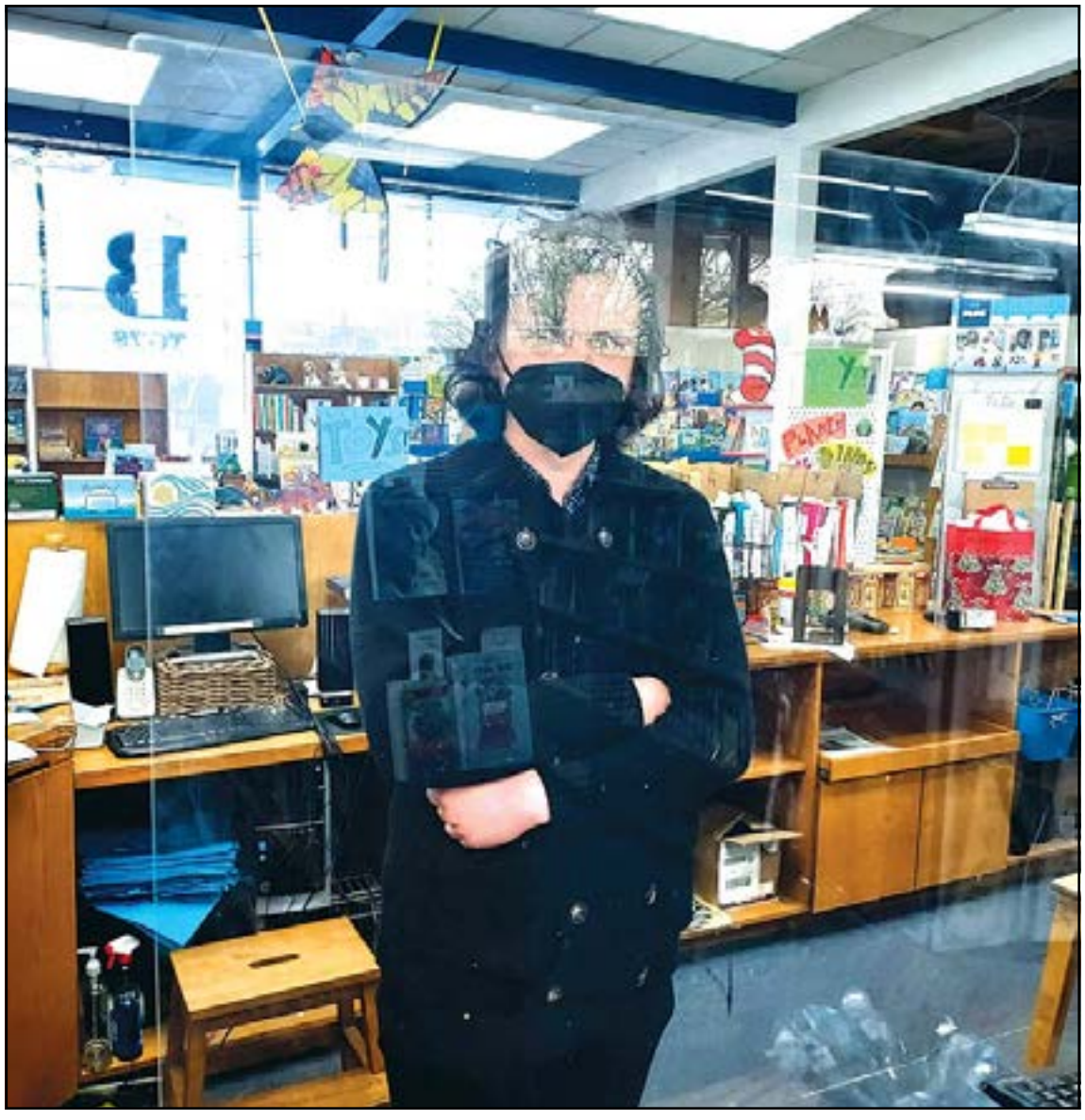
"Ending the local emergency declaration means (Sacramento County) Public Health has transitioned from an emergency response to routine monitoring of COVID(-19), as we do with other infectious diseases," she said.

Although the state and county COVID-19 state of emergencies were rescinded, the pandemic continues, Kasirye told this paper.

"The decision to extend or end a pandemic status for an infectious disease is made by the World Health Organization (WHO)," she said.

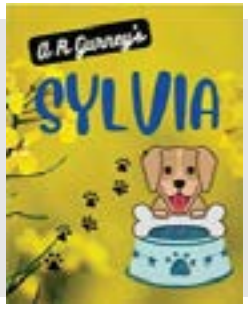
Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO's director-general, mentioned last September that the end of the

See COVID-19 on page 7



Photos by Lance Armstrong
While wearing a mask, Harrison Daly, a manager at The Avid Reader, stands behind a Plexiglas barrier inside this bookstore at 1945 Broadway.

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To register, visit www.RaceRoster.com, and search for "Kaiser Permanente Women's Fitness Festival."

COVID-19

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pandemic is "in sight."

"We have never been in a better position to end the pandemic," he said during a news briefing in Geneva. "We are not there yet, but the end is in sight."

Ghebreyesus added that it is necessary to "seize this opportunity."

"A marathon runner does not stop when the finish line comes into view," he said. "She runs harder, with all the energy she has left. So must we. We can see the finish line. We're in a winning position, but now is the worst time to stop running."

In addition to the state and county's actions to end their COVID-19 state of emergencies, the California Department of Public Health announced on March 3 that beginning on April 3, masks will no longer be required in indoor high-risk and health care settings. Those places include health care, long-term care, and correctional facilities, as well as homeless, emergency, warming and cooling centers.

During this paper's March 11 visit to various Broadway businesses, Mark Jefcoat, who owns P&M Tool Center with his wife, Debra, spoke about his current thoughts on COVID-19.

"It's so confusing," he said. "There are so many (opinions). Every person has got a different thing to say about it. We quit wearing masks in here a long time ago. Nobody down here is wearing them."

Debra noted that while Joe Shook, the business's manager, has never been infected with the COVID-19 virus, she and Mark were not so fortunate, despite getting all of their vaccination shots.

"We went for our fourth shot (on Friday, Dec. 2, 2022), and I (later) woke up at 4

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P&M Tool Center owners Mark and Debra Jefcoat were among the local small business owners who managed to survive the economic challenges they faced due to temporarily closing their businesses during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Silvia Alvarado, owner of Sancho's Mariscos & Mexican Food restaurant at 2026 Broadway, mentioned that she likes that most people are much more comfortable in their lives than they were during the height of COVID-19.



As need for mental health resources grows, schools search for cost-effective support

By Samantha Rickards
St. Francis High School student

Editor's note: This article was made available through the Sacramento Student Reporter Program.

As the mental health challenges faced by teens seem to be growing worse, schools around the country – including St. Francis all-girls Catholic High School – have pursued new strategies to help students cope.

A Feb. 13 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report found 57% of U.S. teen girls felt persistently sad or hopeless in 2021. That was double the rate among boys, a nearly 60% increase from 2011, and the highest level in the past decade.

The rise in mental health challenges is not attributable to one culprit alone. Experts say it has many origins, including the pandemic, social media toxicity, racial and gender inequality and school shootings.

"Young people are experiencing a level of distress that calls on us to act with urgency and compassion," CDC Division of Adolescent and School Health Director Kathleen Ethier wrote for a press release accompanying the report. "With the right programs and services in place, schools have the unique ability to help our youth flourish."

At the same time, the need for mental health services has increased, schools confront the problem of how to sustain wellness programs after September 2024, when COVID-19 relief funds earmarked for mental health services disappear.

Funding is sorely needed in California, where there remains a severe need for access to counselors.

A national ranking released by the American School Counselor Association put California near the bottom in student-to-counselor ratio for the 2021-22 school year. California schools had 509 students for every counselor, higher than the national average of 408 to 1, and more than double the association's recommended ratio of 250 to 1. Only six states had higher ratios than California.

As one of the many schools focusing on student mental health, St. Francis High School has explored various options to provide support, even turning to the practice of peer counseling – better known on campus as the Guardian Angels Peer Team. The girls in this group are selected to receive special training to help them offer support to their fellow students.

"The Peer Team uses their empathy and compassion to connect with students who need support navigating through the difficulties that happen to them and around them," St. Francis Dean of Students Cynthia Cost said.

The Peer Team was established in 2017 with the intent of facilitating a positive sisterhood in which mental health resources are more accessible.

"Our young women were already helping their peers, so we wanted to create a formalized program where they could gain extra training and assistance," Cost said.

The program is overseen by Kym Weinandy, head of the wellness department at St. Francis. Weinandy meets regularly with the Peer Team to check in and offer her assistance and guidance.

"My role in the Guardian Angels Peer Team is to train and mentor a selected group of students to become social and emotional supporters for their peers," Weinandy said.

Along with choosing and training each year's team of Angels, Weinandy is entrusted to assign Peer Team members to students.



Photo by Samantha Rickards
St. Francis High School student Elise Blomquist serves as the junior leader of this school's Guardian Angels Peer Team.

"Peer Team members are assigned to students based on their availability, as well as what unique skill set they will offer to the student," Weinandy said.

What sets this team apart from other forms of counseling is its easy accessibility and emphasis on students supporting each other.

"Peer counseling is such a safe outlet for so many students," Cost said. "A lot of the time, especially with young people, there is a lack of knowledge of where to get help and, more still, young people would rather listen to young people."

Peer Team members never lecture or advise their peers. They simply listen, offer suggestions, establish a connection and provide support.

"We want to make anyone reaching out to us feel safe and secure when being vulnerable," Peer Team member and junior Elise Blomquist said. "Anything a peer says to us stays confidential, unless it falls under one of the three exceptions: if someone is physically hurting them, if they are planning to physically hurt someone else, or if they are seriously injuring or planning to kill themself."

While the Peer Team is known for providing support

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COVID-19

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(o'clock) in the morning, sicker than I've ever, ever been," she said. "Mark was OK until Sunday night. I tested negative a couple days later, but I was really sick. Both of us got it right after the shot. We're suspicious (that those shots gave us the virus)."

Thinking back on the early part of the pandemic, Mark recalled his decision to temporarily close his business.

"When the general order was given by the governor to close everybody, we closed that day," he said. "I could have called myself an essential business, but my concern was all the homeless down here. I thought that COVID(-19) was going to wipe them out, and I thought they would be all infected. I was wrong.

"Anyway, for two months, we stayed closed, and then after that, we opened up again and the business that we lost came back within a few months."

Mark added that a key factor in his business's survival was that he was operating it debt-free.

"In small business, stay the hell out of debt (in case) something like (COVID-19) comes along," he said. "Everything in here is paid for, so I had no worries."

Silvia Alvarado, owner of Sancho's Mariscos & Mexican Food restaurant, which opened on March 1 in the old Pancho's Cocina Mexicana restaurant location, mentioned that she likes that most people are much more comfortable in their lives than they were during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"People, they're not afraid, they're not scared like before," she said. "It's more calm. Yeah, I think so. We can't live being afraid of everything. I really believe in that. So, if God is going to take me today, he's going to take me no matter what."

Alvarado recalled teaching her children to live responsibly during the pandemic.

"I told my kids, don't panic, just wash your hands (after) every time you go out and touch everything, and wear your mask over your (nose and mouth)," she said. "Be responsible and don't be panicked either."

Harrison Daly, a manager at The Avid Reader, told this paper that while most local businesses have ended their employee mask-wearing policies, this bookstore continues to uphold their policy.

"Ultimately, (this policy is) for the health of our patrons, most of whom are disproportionately elder(ly)," he said. "So, we take all that into consideration. We should still treat it seriously. COVID(-19) hasn't gone away, and, of course, we still need to figure out ways to live with it.

"But for today, for the benefit of our patrons, staff is required to wear masks. Patrons are encouraged to wear masks. It's still like a weird, liminal phase we're in, so we don't know what the future will look like; hopefully a maskless one. But we're taking things one step at a time."

Health

Continued from page 8

through individual counseling, they also run programs that promote team building and mental health awareness.

"We lead a variety of different activities on campus, such as support groups, assemblies, a podcast, and many group bonding activities," the Peer Team's senior leader, Isabella Martin, said.

The role of a Guardian Angel is not a job taken lightly by the team. They see it as a responsibility and a way to better their community.

"Being a Guardian Angel is truly a fulfilling job. I love supporting my peers and it allows me to make a positive impact on my community," Martin said.

Blomquist added, "Being a part of the Peer Team is a privilege for me. Asking for help is incredibly difficult for many people, so I feel honored to be entrusted with their vulnerability and be able to provide comfort and support."

The Peer Team members say the program has benefited the St. Francis community at large by defusing the stigma around mental health and creating a better environment for wellness.

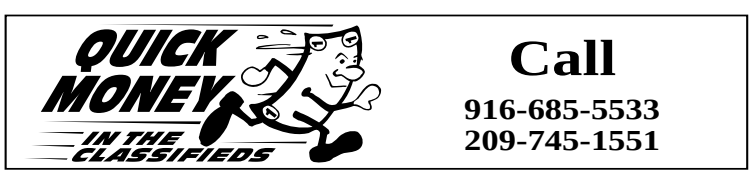
"The Peer Team has provided students with an added layer of support," Martin said. "Being in high school can come with a lot of challenges, so having a Peer Team has really allowed mental health to be a priority on our campus."

Team members were unanimous in saying the program should be recommended to other schools.

"Definitely," Weinandy said. "In fact, other Catholic schools in the area are already looking into modeling programs after the Peer Team."

As mental health challenges continue to grow even more prevalent, the Guardian Angels Peer Team hopes to become a more prominent resource and advocate for their community.

"They don't know how many lives they have actually changed and helped, and I don't think they'll ever know," Cost said.





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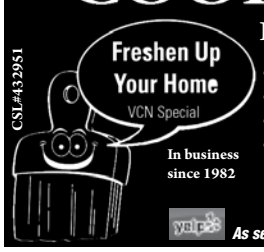
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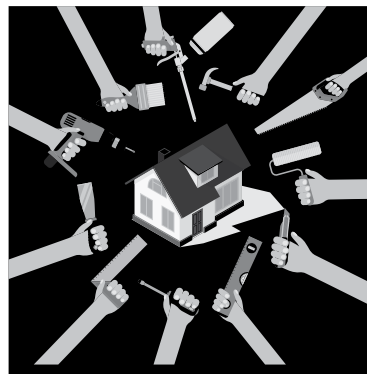
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