

**STEVEN P. DINKIN** A Path Forward

# SWIMMERS FIND COMMUNITY AND CELEBRATE BEST DAY EVER

"It's the first time we've seen each other in clothes."

Lest you think I had a different sort of Thanksgiving, I heard this from someone who's a member of the Del Mar Buoy Girls, a group of mostly women who share a love of the ocean, and swimming.

The Buoy Girls gathered at my home on a recent Sunday morning. My wife, Tara, a member, talks about the special bond the swimmers have formed, which goes beyond the water's edge. I was eager to learn how the group started and why it's endured — especially at a time of increasing disconnection in our society.

The Buoy Girls came to be in 2007 — the result of a happy accident. Founders Barbara and Janice literally bumped heads while swimming in the ocean near Del Mar. Barbara asked Janice, "Do you swim here often?"

It was the unofficial founding of a group that's attracted dozens of swimmers over the years, ranging in age from 8 to 90 years old.

Members have just one rule: to circle the buoy when they reach it. The first buoy is one-quarter mile from shore; the second buoy is a half-mile away.

Ocean swimming is full of challenges: creatures (some friendly, like sea lions; some less friendly, like sharks), unpredictable weather, a strong undertow. For safety, the Buoy Girls swim in pairs, coaxing each other when the going gets tough. Maggie, Barbara's daughter, is the de facto group leader and head cheerleader. Barbara provides encouragement from the shore. Their outings conclude with a head count and a "best day ever" declaration by Darcie, who's swum with the group for more than 10 years.

Their affinity for the ocean aside, members agreed — to a person — that the group is about friendship first. And social interaction. For some, the swimming and camaraderie have filled a deep personal void, including the loss of a spouse. They faithfully gather, having seen the dark side

of life, to move and to laugh and to support each other.

There is also a shared accountability that comes with knowing that others are pulling for you. But for the Buoy Girls, that accountability is judgment free: Be it the weather or just feeling like you want to stay in bed (swimming begins at 7:30 a.m.), absences are always excused. No one is tracking who shows up and who doesn't, nor how quickly a swim is completed. It's not a competitive group.

The durability of the Buoy Girls speaks to the power of community: People with different backgrounds and perspectives who come together, believe in and motivate each other, and find collective strength to navigate challenging issues. To them, swimming is anything but a solitary sport.

I learned from Jerri-Ann, a longtime Buoy Girl, that their love of swimming had revealed other mutual interests, like cooking and gardening. During the pandemic, the Buoy Girls helped

local fishermen, distributing what couldn't be used by restaurants. And they swam — finding refuge (and sanity) in the ocean, and vigor from their fellow swimmers.

Two hours into our conversation, there wasn't a single mention of politics — and the midterm elections were just two days away. I couldn't resist the temptation to ask the group if they ever "go there."

Turns out they do. But Maggie said the conversations are respectful. Differing perspectives are welcome. "We listen, and we hear each other," she said. When one of the members told the group she wouldn't get a COVID vaccination, Maggie simply replied, "Please don't hug my mother."

In his seminal 2000 book, "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," Robert Putnam wrote about the disintegration of our social structures at the end of the 20th century. As a country, we had become less involved and engaged — bowling alone, when

we once bowled in leagues — straining the social capital needed for a happy, healthy and safe society.

Social capital is built on trust. It enables us to more easily resolve our collective problems, because we understand that our fates are linked. As Putnam said, "People who have active and trusting connections to others — whether family members, friends or fellow bowlers — develop or maintain character traits that are good for the rest of society. Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others."

Healthy democracies depend upon social connectedness. And so does our personal well-being. With every swim and buoy turn, the Del Mar Buoy Girls live this truth.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncrconline.com

## SCENE

### San Ysidro Health's Founding Mother

Carmen Martinez is recognized during benefit golf tournament

BY U-T STAFF

Carmen Martinez, San Ysidro Health's last living Founding Mother, celebrated her 99th birthday and a legacy of activism at the annual Clasico de Golf Tournament on Sept. 26 at the San Diego Country Club.

Seeking medical services for their children, Martinez and six other mothers came together in 1969 to establish the first clinic with four

volunteer physicians in a little white casita. Today, San Ysidro Health has more than 50 program sites and continues the goal of its Founding Mothers to improve the health and well-being of the community with access for all.

Coinciding with Martinez's birthday celebration, was the annual Clasico de Golf Tournament. It hosted 144 golfers and raised \$233,000 in support of senior health services.

If your organization has held a philanthropic event, you're welcome to email a high-resolution photo along with information on the event to society@sduniontribune.com. Please clearly identify those in the photo, make them aware their image might appear in print and online, include the photographer's name for credit and be sure to include the who, what, where, when and why information on the event.



JDIXX PHOTOGRAPHY

**From left:** Terry Whitaker, SYHealth senior VP of Facility Dev.; Sonia Tucker, VP of Patient Population; Yolanda Santana, board trustee; Reynaldo Perez, trustee; Carmen Martinez; Gloria Ramirez, trustee; Mercedes Bernal, trustee; Veronica Dela Rosa, exec. VP; Ana Melgoza, VP, External Affairs; Brian Wallace, VP, CFO.

## EL CAJON

FROM B1

rests at or within 500 feet of the hotels for the past five years, allowing for a comparison between periods when there were few vouchers and years when there were many.

There were almost no vouchers used anywhere in the city in 2018 and 2019, the years before the pandemic.

El Cajon police made 710 arrests near the hotels during that period.

San Diego County launched its voucher program in El Cajon in 2020, joining other organizations that help the homeless rent rooms.

As the number of vouchers rose, police made 863 arrests during a more recent two-year period, from the end of 2020 through last August.

Said another way, there were an additional 153 arrests in years when the hotels were housing more homeless.

However, arrests didn't surge even as the number of vouchers expanded dramatically.

Near the start of 2020, a tally by the Regional Task Force on the Homeless found only a handful of vouchers in use. That total jumped to 247 at one point the year after and once hit 602 this year.

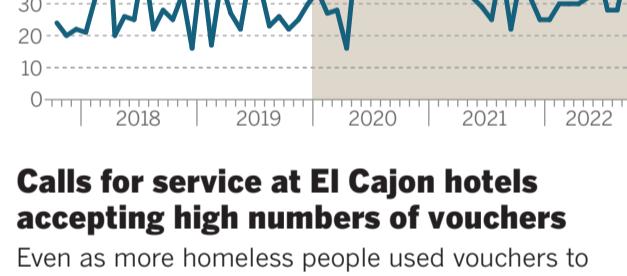
Nonetheless, some of the arrest numbers in 2022 are comparable to periods before the county program existed.

Looking at all calls for service, not just those that resulted in handcuffs, paints a similarly complicated picture.

The Police Department only maintains call records for two years, making it impossible to compare recent

### Arrests near El Cajon hotels accepting high numbers of homeless vouchers

While arrests within 500 feet of the hotels for the past five years did increase when more homeless people began renting rooms in 2020, the numbers did not continue to climb even as more vouchers were issued.



### Calls for service at El Cajon hotels accepting high numbers of vouchers

Even as more homeless people used vouchers to rent rooms at seven hotels, the number of times police were called to each has somewhat declined in the past two years.



Data on arrests as of Sept. 28, 2022.

Source: El Cajon Police Department

BLAKE NELSON & KARTHIKA NAMBOOTHIRI U-T

months with periods when vouchers were not widespread.

But calls have somewhat dropped even as voucher use rose.

Crime has also increased regionwide, including in cities not accepting vouchers, according to an April report from the San Diego Association of Governments. Throughout El Cajon, major crimes rose 1 percent overall from 2020 to 2021, the most

recent year available, records show.

City officials have run separate analyses using similar data.

Spokesman David Richards confirmed their review showed the largest crime surges at the hotels occurred in late 2020 and the first half of 2021.

Averaging out recent years shows "steady crime at these motels," he wrote in an email.

The city also looked at two hotels not participating in the voucher program. While crime also rose at those places, it didn't rise as fast as at locations accepting vouchers, Richards said.

In an interview earlier this year, El Cajon Police Chief Mike Moulton said officers had noticed "drug activity" around some hotels in early September. Several people using vouchers were found to have felony warrants, including one person arrested Nov. 12, according to police.

Officials have also objected to people staying in local hotels who are not from El Cajon.

While numbers can change day to day, county data offers one recent snapshot.

There were at least 98 people using vouchers on Oct. 10, according to County Supervisor Joel Anderson's office. Thirty-five said their last permanent housing was in El Cajon, while some reported places around East County, including Santee, data show.

Ten were from San Diego, and one was from Texas.

However, many had more recently been staying elsewhere. Nearly half said they'd spent the previous night in unincorporated parts of El Cajon, meaning places that fall under the county's jurisdiction. About a quarter came directly from Spring Valley and 16 had been in Lakeside. Only one person said they'd spent the previous night in the city.

The seven hotels are the Travelodge, Relax Inn & Suites, Rancho San Diego Inn, America's Best Value Inn, The Quality Inn & Suites, Clarion Pointe and El Cajon Inn & Suites.

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## PILLS

FROM B1

report is disturbing because we have been tracking this problem," said Dr. Roneet Lev, an emergency and addiction physician at Scripps Mercy Hospital who sits on the county's prescription drug abuse task force.

"The bottom line is there is no safe illicit drug supply," she said. "Unless you are getting pills from the pharmacy with your name on it, you cannot trust the pills."

With illegal fentanyl flooding the illicit drug market, teens and adults need to be told that any drug experimentation is dangerous. Lev said anyone who is around friends or family members experimenting with drugs should be sure to have naloxone on hand. The medication can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose if administered promptly.

"Years ago kids would make a mistake, would experiment and would be forgiven," Lev said. "Nowadays it can be a death sentence, and that is very scary."

According to the task force's annual report, there was a 44 percent decrease in the annual number of dispensed prescription opioid pills per resident in San Diego County over the past seven years — from 36.5 pills dispensed in 2014 to 20.6 in 2021.

But the fire hose supply of illicit fentanyl flowing in the region remains a problem.

Earlier this year, officials dubbed San Diego County a "national