

Paint by wellness

At St. Joseph Hospital in Orange, those who are going through or have survived cancer can take part in free wellness programs from the comfort of their homes.

BY VERA CASTANEDA

Sylvia Valdez said she's nearing the end of her life — age wise.

The 72-year-old Garden Grove resident is in the mode of re-trying all the things she thinks she'd failed in. Art is one of them.

"In elementary school, I would hide my artwork from the nuns and my fellow students, because I could not draw at all," Valdez said. "It was a disaster, but once I had cancer and decided to join the wellness programs, I have a whole different perspective on life."

Valdez was diagnosed with lung cancer in spring 2019, underwent surgery and has been free of the disease for the past 16 months. For Valdez, the biggest change in perspective is gratitude for life.

She joined the St. Joseph Hospital's cancer wellness program, which is a holistic approach to health. It focuses on body weight, nutrition, exercise and lifestyle. The program includes a one-on-one evaluation and plan, weekly or bimonthly check-in sessions, meditative and breathing practices, fitness (aerobics, dance, stretches, yoga and pi-

See *Wellness*, page R7

CANCER PATIENT and survivor artwork completed through the Gaze Art program offered by St. Joseph Hospital in Orange.

Courtesy of Janni Buaiz and Heather Wallace

Refugees' mental healthcare services limited

The issue affecting Cambodians and Vietnamese is linked to a shortage of bicultural, bilingual providers.

BY AGNES CONSTANTE

This is the second story in a three-part TimesOC series "Improving Healthcare Access for Cambodians and Vietnamese," supported by the USC Annenberg Center for Health Journalism 2020 California Fellowship.

Paul Hoang moved to Orange County in 2007 after a taxing work year as a mental health clinician in Illinois.

In the Midwest, he had seen clients who drove up to six hours once a month — even through blizzards — for his services. Demand was high because there was a lack of providers serving the Vietnamese community, he said.

"There was a lot of generational trauma and especially war trauma that had been passed down to myself. It was just very, very hard for me to process."

— My Nguyen

It was something he tried to remedy by getting involved in local politics to advocate for more resources.

But after a year, he burnt out. Hoang had hoped to find more groups that served the Vietnamese community and more support for providers in Orange County, given its Vietnamese population of approximately 200,000, according to the 2010 census. He said he arrived surprised to find that neither of those things existed.

"It was very scattered and people were working in silos,"

See *Health*, page R5

Student-led nonprofit O.C. Justice Project expands beyond Irvine

BY VERA CASTANEDA

At the start of his high school semester, 16-year-old Arush Mehrotra is juggling distance learning, applying to colleges and starting a social justice nonprofit.

He said he's not one to sit still. Before Mehrotra graduates next year, he wants to build out a foundation for the O.C. Justice Project so its impact can last even after he's gone.

He started the project at Irvine's University High School in January as a way to create a platform for youth, like himself, to practice activism about the issues they are passionate about in their local community. But the germ of the project started during his freshman year when he listened to a "Ted Radio Hour" podcast about cash bail.

It sent him on a rabbit hole of

research that piqued his interest in social justice causes leading him to write op-eds for Los Angeles Times High School Insider and get involved in his own school newspaper, Sword & Shield.

"Our mission, just broadly speaking, is to inspire my generation, the younger generation, to care about the issues that threaten the democratic ideals," Mehrotra said.

Mehrotra reached out to Krishna Khawani to become involved in the project. The two had met during mock trial and debate activities, where they discussed policing and drug reforms. But forming a school club at University High under stay-at-home orders proved to be difficult.

Instead, they made O.C. Justice Project a nonprofit with the help of an incubation program at Irvine LIGHTS and decided to

form school clubs during the next school year.

Khawani, the 16-year-old director of finances for the nonprofit, said becoming a registered 501(c)(3) and not having to deal with school club guidelines makes fundraising easier.

Mehrotra looked through other schools' club lists to search for like-minded groups and reached out. That's how he found Noah Kim, the nonprofit's director of operations.

Kim, a 17-year-old Portola High student, started a club called "Wrongfully Accused," which dealt with raising awareness about the wrongful convictions of people who were innocent or given an unfair sentence.

"Overall what Arush has done with O.C. Justice Projects, I genu-

See *Justice*, page R7



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

ARUSH MEHROTRA stands at the Irvine Civic Center. An Irvine high school senior, Mehrotra is balancing distance learning and social justice work like the growing reach of the O.C. Justice Project across local high schools.

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Despite resistance from some local residents, O.C. Board of Supervisors OKs \$7.5M budget

BY BEN BRAZIL

The Orange County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a \$7.5-billion budget on Tuesday after many residents spoke out against the county's significant investment in law enforcement.

About 43% of the total 2020-21 budget is devoted to community services, while 20% is allocated toward public protection, including the Sheriff's Department and district attorney's office.

But some residents took aim at the county's \$890-million discretionary budget, which the supervisors have total control over. Most of the total budget was already apportioned.

Public protection makes up \$490.6 million of the discretionary funding, while community services make up \$154.2 million.

Pat Davis of Anaheim took umbrage with the supervisors' favoring of law enforcement over social programs in a written submission to the county that was read aloud during the meeting.

"The ratio of monies applied to public protection and community services in no way matches the needs of the community — your community," Davis wrote. "The times we find ourselves in, including a COVID pandemic and social unrest, are guaranteed to change our country, as you so comfortably know it... You need to look around you and see the needs are great, and you have so many resources at your disposal. You can make significant life-saving changes. Why you don't do so is most telling."

Rona Henry of Laguna Woods wrote in a submitted form to the supervisors that there should be greater investment in permanent supportive and



Irfan Khan | Los Angeles Times

THE ORANGE COUNTY Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a \$75-million budget on Tuesday, leaving some residents angered at the county's significant investment in law enforcement. Some say less discretionary funding should be allocated to law enforcement and more should be spent on community services.

affordable housing. "It's time for the county to start seriously budgeting for affordable and supportive housing — it's the morally right way to care for and protect our citizens," Henry wrote.

"Moreover, following a housing-first policy where we get people housed and then address the other issues has proven to be an effective way to save on healthcare, mental healthcare and law enforcement costs. Please show foresight and planning for Orange County's housing needs, please allocate sig-

nificantly more funds for affordable and supportive housing for people with very low and low incomes."

Supervisors didn't address the concerns of the residents at the meeting. A vote was taken shortly after public comments.

"Their complete silence spoke volumes," activist Briana Zimmerman said in a phone interview.

Zimmerman is a co-founder of the People's Budget, a community coalition that took a survey of more than 1,000 residents, showing that survey

respondents living in the county favor greater investment in public health and social services, while supervisors favor investment in law enforcement.

The coalition is made up of various community groups, including the ACLU of Southern California, Housing is a Human Right OC, Chispa and the Orange County Equality Coalition, among others.

"People were thoughtful, they were asking just for a response from the Board of Supervisors, and they were met with silence," Zimmerman said.

The findings of the report are in line with a nationwide movement to defund police departments and reinvest in community programs.

The report says that residents who replied to the survey support investment of 77% of the discretionary budget to community services like public and mental health, affordable housing, rent relief and other social programs, while the Board of Supervisors' discretionary budget allocates 17% toward community services.

The report also calls for a 10% discretionary budget allocation toward public safety, while the supervisors' budget devotes 55% of the budget toward law enforcement agencies like the Sheriff's Department, district attorney's office and jails.

Zimmerman said her group will continue to advocate for the survey's findings.

"We are here for the long haul," Zimmerman said.

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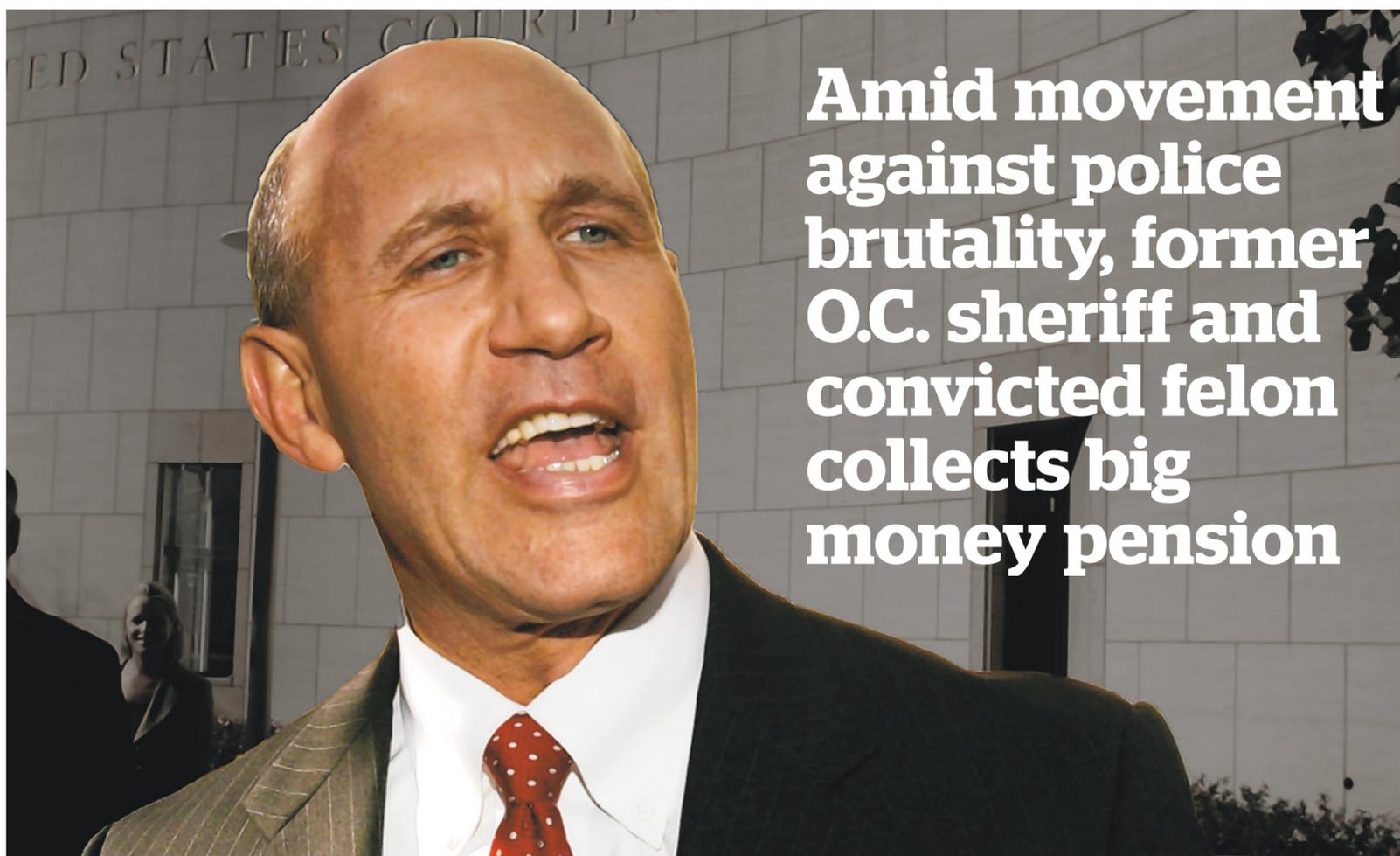
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Amid movement against police brutality, former O.C. sheriff and convicted felon collects big money pension

Photo by Irfan Khan | Los Angeles Times | Illustration by Greg Diaz | Staff Designer

FORMER ORANGE COUNTY Sheriff Mike Carona speaks outside federal court in Santa Ana in 2009 after being convicted of witness tampering. He was sentenced to 5½ years.

BY BEN BRAZIL

As the national movement against police brutality and corruption continues, former Orange County Sheriff and ex-convict Mike Carona is quietly collecting an annual pension of more than \$200,000.

Carona was convicted for attempting to obstruct a grand jury investigation and sentenced to 5½ years in prison in 2009, though he was released 14 months early.

A jury acquitted Carona of prosecutors' claims that he misused his office to accept secret cash payments and provided badges and concealed weapons licenses to campaign contributors.

Jurors said after the trial they believed he had ac-

cepted cash and gifts, but they weren't able to consider that due to a statute of limitations that prevented them from considering acts committed after October 2002.

According to Transparent California, Carona collected a pension of \$227,136 in 2019. Between 2013 and 2018, the pension ranged from \$212,332 to \$234,530.

Carona's high pension has garnered new meaning amid a national movement against police misconduct.

"Does Carona really need \$220,000?" said Rose Ochoa, founder of Transforming Justice OC. "... Definitely \$220,000 does not make sense."

She continued: "Carona's not thinking about what that actually means, what

the witness tampering did, how many lives that impacted. Because he's able to live comfortably off of his pension and whatever additional financial support he has."

Carona declined to comment through his attorneys.

Zoe-Raven Wianecki, who runs OC Protests, said law enforcement officers like Carona should be stripped of their pensions for committing misconduct.

"It's definitely not uncommon for police officers to lose their jobs and be able to continue to retain the taxpayers' dollars, which is absurd," Wianecki said.

"Police know they are going to be protected no matter what. That has to be

one of the first things to go when we talk about defunding police is allowing police to retain these absurdly large pensions."

Wianecki has been one of the leading architects of the anti-police-brutality movement in Orange County. OC Protests has been a primary source for many activists looking to get involved with the Black Lives Matter movement following the killing of George Floyd.

"Look, any time a cop steps out of line, if they lose their job and their pension, it would just create a much larger and greater deterrent to police brutality and misconduct," Wianecki said.

While some may feel Carona is undeserving of his pension, it is protected

by law, which dictates that pension benefits are only lost for prospective years after the crime was committed. Carona worked for 32 years prior to his conviction.

"The reason they did it that way was they were concerned that taking away pension benefits that already had been earned prior to the date of misconduct would be unconstitutional," said Lawrence Rosenthal, a Chapman University law professor.

The California and federal constitutions have provisions that make it unconstitutional to "impair the obligation of a contract." In other words, Rosenthal said if the government promises you something, it has to keep its promise.

"They can't decide, you know what, we're no longer wanting to honor our contractual obligations and that includes pensions because that's a kind of contract," said Rosenthal, who specializes in civil rights, criminal law and criminal justice.

"The fact that Sheriff Carona did such a crummy job running his office up to and including the badge-selling scheme — although he was convicted of witness tampering rather than badge-selling bribery — and that he's still making all this money, is of course quite distressing," Rosenthal said. "But you know, constitutional rights often lead to distressing results."

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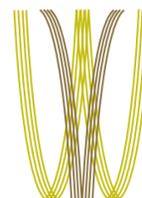
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Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

THE FOUND Poetry Project, started by Muck's 2020 Artist in Residence, poet Katharine Zaun, invites community members to submit found poetry for a group exhibition at Muckenthaler Cultural Center in Fullerton.

Muckenthaler Cultural Center asks visitors to become part of the art

BY BEN BRAZIL

A new poetry art exhibit at the Muckenthaler Cultural Center in Fullerton allows visitors to become part of the art.

The Found Poetry Project art installation features amateur found poetry on one side, while the other side is left blank for visitors to leave poems or thoughts in chalk and sticky notes.

The exhibit was created by poet Katharine Zaun, an artist in residence at the Muckenthaler, as a way to bring the community together during the pandemic.

Zaun said she thought of the idea after being inspired by the Muckenthaler's distribution of free art kits to children since the beginning of the pandemic.

"It made me think, 'What is something that I could do with poetry that would engage some of the Muck members at home,'" Zaun said.

Zaun held a few virtual instructional workshops where she explained how to create found poems for those who had never created them before. Then people sent in their poems, which are framed on one side of the installation over

a mural that Zaun created from painting over cardboard.

The other side of the mural is painted with chalk paint, where visitors can contribute.

"The pixelated effect of the painted cardboard background is representative of the digitally saturated quality of our lives during this pandemic," Zaun said in a description of the art installation. "We chose cardboard to paint on — rather than painting directly on the mural's wood panels — because we wanted to stay with the idea of the found poems by using found objects, too."

"The found poems stand out against the cardboard background to portray how we've attempted to piece together this new normal and find connection in new ways — find new narratives that give shape to this strange and isolating time."

The Found Poetry Project is on the lawn of the Muckenthaler center, which is open from noon to 4 p.m. Tuesday to Sunday.

For more information, visit themuck.org/found-poetry-project.

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Orange County mayors call on governor to let Disneyland and Knott's reopen

BY HUGO MARTÍN

Six months after these parks closed across California because of the pandemic, Orange County politicians, trade-worker union leaders and tourism promoters expressed frustration that the state has yet to give Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm a path to reopen.

"It's a disaster right here," Anaheim Mayor Harry Sidhu said at a Wednesday news conference, joining the mayors of Buena Park and Garden Grove on a hotel rooftop overlooking Disneyland. "How long are you going to keep us closed?"

Their ire was directed at Gov. Gavin Newsom, who said Wednesday that state officials were working on health protocols for reopening these parks and that there would be "announcements soon" but did not specify when.

The demand for protocols came the day after a coalition of California theme parks, including Disneyland and Knott's, also urged the state to release guidelines under which they could join parks in Florida and elsewhere in reopening.

The cities around Disneyland have lost \$1.3 billion in taxes and other revenues since the pandemic closures began, said Todd Ament, president of the Anaheim Chamber of Commerce. "The time is now to reopen our theme parks and restore the economic vitality we have lost," he said.

It was the meeting of unusual circumstances that pushed local elected officials to demand change to a state health mandate and aligned union leaders with their members' bosses.

The Disneyland Resort is Orange County's largest employer, with about 31,000 workers before the pandemic. It draws tourists who book hotel rooms, eat at restaurants and buy souvenirs, supporting jobs

throughout the region. All told, the resort generates 3.6% of all jobs in the county, according to a recent Cal State Fullerton study.

With unemployment high, prospects for a new federal relief package uncertain and the state's unemployment relief measures not bridging the gap, cities, residents and businesses are feeling the pinch.

Walt Disney Co. has a history of political heft, especially in Disneyland's hometown of Anaheim. In many ways, the resort's financial interests and the city's are intertwined; Disney is far and away Anaheim's biggest tourism magnet. For years, Anaheim gave subsidies, incentives and rebates to the company for investing in its theme parks and adjacent Downtown Disney shopping district — a practice that halted in 2018. Disney has also backed candidates in local elections, including Sidhu.

Meanwhile, Orange County has been a stronghold for critics of COVID-19 safety measures.

The county's then-health chief, Dr. Nichole Quick, resigned in June amid death threats and harsh public criticism for issuing an order requiring people to wear face coverings while in public places, at work or visiting businesses.

Quick's replacement, Dr. Clayton Chau, swiftly revised her mandate, strongly recommending that people wear masks but not requiring it. Newsom intervened a week later, making face coverings mandatory statewide.

Over the summer, Orange County education leaders approved school-reopening guidelines that don't require masks for students or increased distancing between people in classrooms. Their recommendation stands, but school districts are free to enforce stricter measures.

Orange County lawmak-



PEOPLE WALK toward Disneyland's entrance March 13, the park's last day of operation before its closure.

Kent Nishimura
Los Angeles Times

ers, tourism officials and union leaders who called for the reopening of Disneyland Resort and Knott's Berry Farm argued that the number of COVID-19 cases in the county has dropped far enough that the parks can reopen safely.

"Our work against the coronavirus is not done, but we have another crisis that demands our attention," Sidhu said, noting that the unemployment rate in his city is 15% and that Anaheim faces a \$100-million deficit partly from the loss of tax revenue generated by Disneyland Resort.

"This is about preserving and retaining union jobs," said Ernesto Medrano, a representative for the Los Angeles/Orange Counties Building and Construction Trades Council. "We don't want any more layoffs. It's time to go back to work."

Data from the Orange County Health Care Agency show that coronavirus cases in the county have dropped from highs in late July and early August, when the agency reported about 1,000 new cases and more than 10 deaths a day. On Wednesday, the county reported 135 new cases and six deaths.

In total, Orange County has reported more than 51,200 cases and 1,100 coronavirus deaths.

Andrew Noymer, an associate professor of public health at UC Irvine, agreed that COVID-19 case numbers in Orange County have improved but said he would feel more comfortable about opening the

theme parks once coronavirus cases drop even further.

"It's tricky at best to open up something like a Disneyland or a Knott's Berry Farm now," he said. "I personally would not go to a theme park."

Supporters of reopening say theme parks in Florida have reopened without triggering surges in COVID-19 cases, but Noymer said it is difficult to confirm whether the virus has been passed at theme parks because many parkgoers return home to other states and countries.

Parks are "going to draw people from all over the place," he said. "There are just too many unknowns to be fully confident about reopening."

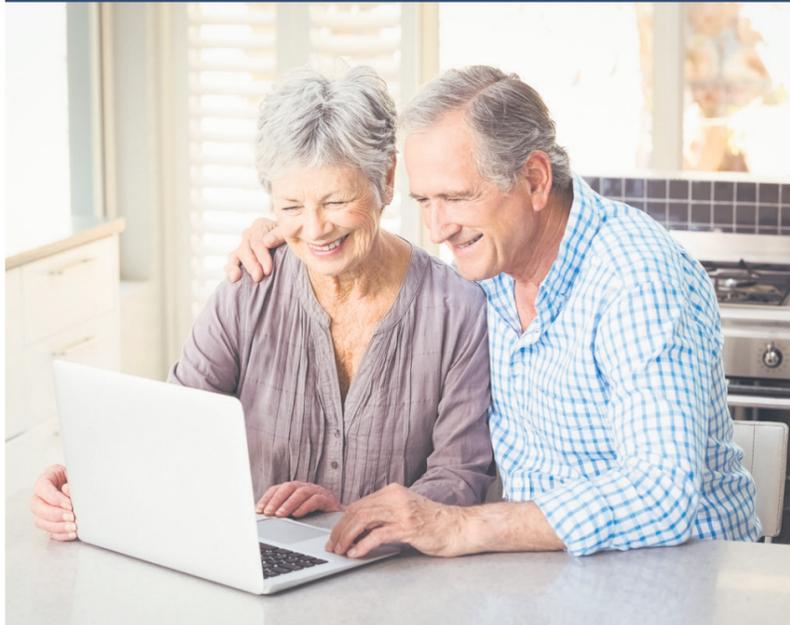
Theme park representatives made assurances Wednesday that if the parks are allowed to reopen they can impose strict safety protocols to protect the health of visitors.

"We have proven we can operate responsibly, with strict health and safety protocols at our properties around the world and at Downtown Disney in Anaheim," Ken Potrock, president of Disneyland Resort, said in a statement, referring to the Disneyland-adjacent shopping district that reopened in July.

Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park noted that it has also opened its restaurants and hosted food tasting events over the last few months while meeting county health protocols.

HUGO MARTÍN writes for the Los Angeles Times.

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HEALTH

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Hoang said. So in 2008, he founded Viet-CARE, a group of mental health professionals working to end the stigma attached to mental health and to address mental health disparities. He also established the group in part to create a space of support for bilingual and bicultural Vietnamese mental health providers.

The need for mental health services in the Vietnamese community is high, Hoang said. But there's a strong stigma attached to mental health in the community, and members aren't always able to access the type of services they need.

It's a similar circumstance faced by the Cambodian community, which in 2010 accounted for about 7,000 of Orange County's population, according to census figures at the time referenced in a report by nonprofits Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Orange County and Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance. In nearby Long Beach, Cambodians constitute an estimated 20,000 of the city's population.

Vietnamese and Cambodians began migrating to the U.S. en masse after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the 1979 fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, under which more than 2 million people died.

The experiences of fleeing war-torn nations has had a lasting impact on refugees' mental health.

A 2015 study in the journal *Psychiatric Services* found that 97% of Cambodian respondents met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. Available data on mental health issues facing Vietnamese refugees — much of which is several years to more than a decade old — show that they suffer from issues including PTSD and panic disorder.

But Hoang said there is a lack of services that account for the unique experiences of the community,



Photo by Don Bartletti

THE RELOCATION CENTER in the Cristianitos area of Camp Pendleton. Many refugees housed at the base decided to stay in Southern California for the warm weather that they were accustomed to in Southeast Asia.

which affects both community members in need and the limited number of bilingual and bicultural providers that are able to serve them.

ROOTS OF TRAUMA

Hoang was among the hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War. Many escaped via boat or foot, experiences that are often a source of trauma for refugees, he said.

He recalled his own experience as a kid of being out at sea on a fishing boat with more than two dozen others for nearly 30 days. In that time, the passengers were attacked by pirates three times, and they reached the point of hunger where people began talking about killing others for food, he said.

The trauma from that period of time persisted for him and his family

even after they settled in the United States.

"I remember hearing my dad screaming every night," Hoang said. "Every night at midnight, I would go to his room and put my ear on his chest just to make sure that he's still breathing. That's common for us who are refugees."

"How are you going to be able to mediate a situation between me and my family if there's no language resources? Or if there's no understanding of the power dynamic of the family?"

— My Nguyen

Phan Eng, 67, a client at Santa Ana-based nonprofit the Cambodian Family, came to the United States in 1985 as a refugee after fleeing the Khmer Rouge regime. Through an interpreter, Kieng Seng, a health navigator and case manager at the nonprofit, Eng said she remembered being put into a plastic bag and being beaten nearly to death. Her life under the regime led her to have nightmares every

night, she said.

When she arrived in the United States, Eng began noticing that she experienced memory loss and often felt sad. She went to a doctor to find out what was wrong, but her diagnosis was unclear.

She was prescribed medication for sleeping

and relaxation. Amina Sen-Matthews, health program director at the Cambodian Family, said her symptoms point to post-traumatic stress disorder.

The trauma refugees experience can be transferred to their children and grandchildren through intergenerational trauma.

Long Beach resident Jocelyn Ly, 23, said her grandfather's experience fighting against the Khmer

Rouge in Cambodia trickled down to the dynamic she has with her father, who was born in a refugee camp.

Ly believes his experience at the camp, coupled with the way he was raised by his parents, affected the way he parented her and her two sisters. He was emotionally absent, she said, and it was difficult for her to not have a strong bond with her father.

"How can you tell someone your experiences, but they don't know how to handle their own?" she said.

A common way Hoang has seen intergenerational trauma manifest is in parents' anxieties around law enforcement, with whom refugees have had negative experiences in Vietnam.

While they may not have had those experiences in the United States, the sight of an individual in uni-



Courtesy of Viet-CARE

PAUL HOANG founded Viet-CARE, a group of mental health professionals serving the Vietnamese American community, in 2008.

form can induce flashbacks that retraumatize them, he said.

"Children are taught to avoid cops," he said. "It's passed on down through parenting. It's passed on down subconsciously through how the parents act around them and around in their environment. So the children grow up observing that in their environment and subconsciously take that on and they too become anxious when they're around police."

As a child, My Nguyen, 25, said he endured physical abuse after sharing information with a family member that triggered fear of law enforcement. He said he missed two days of school before he recovered.

"There was a lot of generational trauma and especially war trauma that had been passed down to myself," Nguyen said. "It was just very, very hard for me to process."

Hoang added that if a refugee is stopped by law enforcement officers and presents symptoms of anxiety, that may be interpreted as the individual hiding wrongdoing.

"That further escalates because law enforcement here are trained to be in control and not understanding the psychology or mental health," he said. "When a person is going

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Andrew Nguyen | Viet-CARE

VIET-CARE members and other participants at the third annual Asian & Pacific Islander Mental Health Empowerment Conference gather in front of a pickup truck that commemorates veterans, who are a vulnerable population to mental health challenges.

HEALTH

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through fight or flight mode or a panic attack, the mind is not processing normally. That creates a lot of misunderstanding and miscommunication, which then produces a negative outcome, which further reinforces the trauma that law enforcement are bad."

IMPACT OF DEPORTATIONS ON MENTAL HEALTH

The past traumas, common among Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees, have been compounded in recent years with the rise in deportations from the U.S. in both communities. Between fiscal years 2017 and 2018, Cambodians saw a 279% hike in deportations, rising from 29 to 110, according to data from Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Vietnamese Americans also saw a rise in deportations: In the last three fiscal years, there were 273 removals, compared to 115 from fiscal years 2014 to 2016, data from the agency show.

A 2018 report by non-profits Southeast Asia Resource Action Center and National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum found that increased detentions and deportations can create financial instability for families — many of whom are low income — contribute to stress and anxiety and cause trauma to children of detainees and deportees.

Long Beach resident Alisha Sim, 23, said she saw her father, who had overcome alcohol abuse, return to the vice as a way to cope after her brother was deported in 2009. The deportation also put financial strain on her family.

Sim's mother sewed clothes for a living and was paid per article of clothing she completed. After her brother's deportation, she saw her mother work until 2 a.m. to sew more clothes to earn more money.

By the time Sim got to college, she had to work multiple jobs. She said she needed to be less financially dependent on her parents, whose incomes were strained because they had to provide for

their household in the U.S. and for Sim's brother in Cambodia. She noted that along with school and work, she served as the caretaker for the elders in her household.

"Going to college was really hard," she said. "I realized that my grades were dropping. I had to get on academic probation a few times, and instead of going to school full time, I had to go part time to work with my schedule."

GENDER IDENTITY

For some in the Vietnamese community, grappling with gender identity while straddling two cultures is another source of strain on mental health.

After coming out to his mother at the age of 16, Nguyen was kicked out of his house and found himself moving from one place to another, he said. It was an action his mother took that was tied to the cultural value of saving face.

"If I were to be queer, then she was a bad mom, or her ex-husband's side of the family can say she's a bad mom," he said.

His displacement, combined with other stressors and a toxic relationship he was in, led Nguyen to attempt suicide that year.

He grew up in Kansas City where he hardly ever encountered any other Vietnamese Americans and where access to healthcare was difficult. He said he tried group and individual therapy following his attempt but didn't find either of them helpful because nobody could understand the intersection of his identities as queer and Vietnamese American.

"How are you going to be able to mediate a situation between me and my family if there's no language resources? Or if there's no understanding of the power dynamic of the family?" Nguyen said.

Gender identity can also be challenging for parents of LGBTQ Vietnamese.

Several mothers of LGBTQ children told TimesOC that they previously had little to no knowledge of what it meant to be LGBTQ or that such a group exists in the Vietnamese American community.

Loan Nguyen, a former Orange County resident who is not related to My



Allen J. Schaben | Los Angeles Times

MINH TRAN of Westminster holds a sign and Pride flag as he protests the exclusion of LGBTQ groups from the Tet parade in Little Saigon in 2013.



Improving Healthcare Access for Cambodians & Vietnamese

Nguyen, said she initially felt guilt and shame when her child at 11 years old told her that she was transgender. Having grown up in a devout Catholic household that valued conformity, Loan Nguyen said she also experienced embarrassment.

"That's the Asian culture, the Catholic religion," she said. "The sense that others will look to you and say you're wrong: 'What's wrong with you? How could you allow this?'"

Those are feelings she said she worked through quickly by learning about gender identity because she knew she had to support her child.

Loan Nguyen now lives in New York where she works as program coordinator at the LGBTQ civil rights group PFLAG NYC. She said families that hold on tightly to traditional practices and customs without acknowledging gender identity can result in oppressed feelings for those who identify as LGBTQ.

"Oftentimes in the name of love, Asian parents will create a lot of harms and mental, emotional pain and suffering for their children," she said. "They

think they know their children best. They will put their foot down and demand a certain way of behavior and acting without understanding where that child is coming from.

"That child will have no choice but to do it out of obedience, out of fear of getting kicked out of the house, out of fear of the religion the parents impose on them. But it's all through guilt. And where does that go? It goes right into that child's psyche."

BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTHCARE ACCESS

Despite the need for mental health services, a number of factors make it difficult for Cambodians and Vietnamese to access them.

During TimesOC's listening sessions with 46 community members, many shared that there is an insufficient amount of mental health educational resources and many aren't aware how to navigate the healthcare system to access them.

Others said their introduction to mental health came from their friends and community-based organizations, not from their families. Some said there is a lack of education on how to identify sexual assault, an occurrence that several individuals said is common in the Cambodian community. Many also noted that they weren't taught in school about the traumas their parents experienced from fleeing from war-torn countries.

Ly said she learned more about the types of experiences her family endured under the Khmer Rouge regime from Long Beach nonprofit Khmer Girls in Action than anywhere else. It was helpful for her to know that history.

"My understanding that my parents have their own personal trauma or issues that they're going through doesn't make me resentful," she said.



Andrew Nguyen / Viet-CARE CNG

MEMBERS OF Viet-CARE, which provides mental healthcare services and advocacy for the Vietnamese American community in Orange County



Genaro Molina | Los Angeles Times

MY NGUYEN marches in a Little Saigon rally in 2018 against the Trump Administration's attempt to change and violate the repatriation agreement between the U.S. and Vietnam. That would have put 8,500 Vietnamese Americans at risk of deportation.

Chandara Lee, a part-time therapist at the Cambodian Family, said his ability to speak Khmer and being a refugee who fled the Khmer Rouge regime with his family in 1979 enables him to better serve clients who have similar experiences.

He said his understanding of those experiences and Cambodian family dynamics allows him to mediate family issues because he is effectively able to communicate various perspectives across different generations.

Lee previously worked at the Orange County Adult Behavioral Health Services, Crisis Assessment Team for about two decades. He said he was the only Khmer-speaking therapist on the team and rarely ever saw any other Cambodian therapists.

He was offered a full-time position at the Cambodian Family, he said, but opted to take on a part-time caseload of 40 clients. While he could and would like to do more to serve the community's need, he also wants to slow down after having worked in the field for 21 years.

Amina Sen-Matthews, health program director at the Cambodian Family, said the agency is heavily reliant on its nine health navigators who double as case managers to make mental health services more accessible to the Cambodian community. They educate clients about mental health, accompany them to therapists and psychiatrists and serve as interpreters, all while taking on similar responsibilities to increase access to physical healthcare services.

Support for providers is crucial as well, Hoang said, which is part of the reason he established Viet-CARE. The group offers the limited number of bilingual providers who serve the community a space to process with each other.

"How do we take care of ourselves and how do we empower ourselves to take care of ourselves?" he said. "Because in the workplace we experience discrimination by our peers, by our non-Asian community. We experience racism, we experience all types of hardships within ourselves as well. Some individuals, even though they are providers, they have a lot to work through on themselves."

The USC Annenberg Center for Health Journalism's engagement editor, Danielle Fox, contributed engagement support to this story, including setting up four listening sessions with 46 members of the Cambodian and Vietnamese American communities.

The next story in the "Improving Healthcare Access for Cambodians and Vietnamese" series will examine efforts to address the lack of culturally sensitive healthcare access in these communities.

AGNES CONSTANTE is a contributor to Times OC.

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WELLNESS

Continued from page R1

lates) and the Gaze Art program.

Valdez participates in many of the program's classes — stretching, mindfulness meditation and art classes. Her ultimate objective is to become a volunteer and spread hope to those who are newly diagnosed with cancer.

While most sessions are offered at the hospital's Center for Cancer Prevention and Treatment in Orange, COVID-19 prompted classes to move online.

The latest Gaze Art workshop started in late August over Zoom and will stretch out for six weeks. It's open to cancer patients and survivors treated at St. Joseph Hospital as well as those in the community. Watercolor art supplies were provided by the center for pickup. The theme, this time around, is smiles.

"I'm finding that even some of the people I work with often, I don't recognize them [when they are wearing a face mask]," said Janni Buaiz, the hospital's cancer wellness navigator. "People were feeling very distant and like their smiles were gone. And so we began to think about transposing the idea of a smile."

Buaiz explained when a patient is newly diagnosed, serious cancer treatments have to be done alone. Families can't come in and nurses can't be near patients like they used to. The experience can be isolating.

About 30 people tune in weekly for a session that typically begins with a breathing exercise, moves on to techniques of mixing colors and then a guided mindful meditation before painting begins.

The Zoom meeting has the feel of a support group. Some of the patients know each other and talk about their lives. One woman showed a photo of her families' newborn.

A few others pulled their pets close to their cameras to introduce them to the



Courtesy of Janni Buaiz and Heather Wallace

CANCER PATIENT and survivor artwork completed through the Gaze Art program.

group.

In the first workshop, participants are tasked with painting a face with a smile and a face mask over it. By the second workshop, they are asked to think about what makes them smile and paint it on top of the sketched face.

Iris Ballard, 25, describes herself as a crafty person. She loves art and since the pandemic has started painting at home on her own.

She was diagnosed in 2018 with undifferentiated carcinoma most likely stemming from her ovaries. Prior to the diagnosis she was active in Muay Thai training at a Lake Forest MMA gym she owns with her husband.

Like Valdez, she signed up for multiple classes including the Gaze Art workshop.

She said being creative makes her feel productive.

"There's people that really need to think about how to take in all the emotion and all of the big things that happen when you're diagnosed with any catastrophic illness or situation in which you really don't feel like you're in control and find a way in which you can begin to get grounded. Art just works," Buaiz said.



AN EXAMPLE of the smile-theme watercolor artwork of the Gaze Art program offered at St. Joseph Hospital.

Although Buaiz leads the meditative practices during the workshop, Heather Wallace leads the art portions.

Wallace, who is also a cancer survivor, teaches children and adults art in Rancho Santa Margarita's Jesus Life private school and has taught through Gaze Art program for about a year.

She said being an art teacher over Zoom is challenging.

"Not only can I not see what they're making, but it's really hard to gauge their attitude — whether they're feeling frustrated or need a little bit of extra help and encouragement," Wallace said. "The good thing is that everyone's all in the same boat so we get to overcome these obstacles together."

The art workshops are

typically conducted once a year.

However, this year there will be four sessions in total with the help of a donation made to the wellness program.

"Using art provides avenues for growth that wouldn't normally be there," Wallace said.

"When you take that creativity and put your right brain into it, something just sparks. And by teaching them these little techniques where they can feel successful and confident, I think that really adds to their overall perception of themselves as a person. You go from cancer survivor or sick person to a boost in confidence in who they are and what they can accomplish."

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JUSTICE

Continued from page R1

inely find it amazing," Kim said. "With my club that I started it last year, I didn't have many members — five to seven members. But Arush spread [the nonprofit] to multiple school districts."

O.C. Justice Project has five executive board members and chapter presidents in seven Irvine and Tustin high schools — University, Woodbridge, Irvine, Portola, Northwood, Arnold O. Beckman and Foothill. They plan to expand nonprofit chapters to schools in Santa Ana and Mission Viejo.

As of today, the nonprofit has 41 members, but Mehrotra said it's bound to grow since chapter presidents have just started to establish clubs at schools this week.

Together the core members have set up a bank account, website and social media.

The organization has three main goals: raising awareness on specific social justice issues, fundraising to support the local community and political outreach.

"We don't specify exactly what social justice issue we want to tackle," Khawani said. "It's because we want to leave it up to our members to sort of follow their own passions and follow what they deem as important to themselves and give them the platform and opportunity to tackle those issues."

Members gravitated toward the Black Lives Matter movement during the peak of protests in the spring and summer.

In June, the nonprofit hosted a Zoom roundtable focused on the movement. The purpose was to learn about the movement and talk about lived experience. It lasted nearly three hours with about 30 local students joining the discussion.

Later, one of the board members designed a Black Lives Matter-themed T-shirt to sell and donate all profits to the Youth Justice Coalition, which works to solve the school-to-prison pipeline. They raised \$700 and shipped the shirts to people

in Anaheim, Huntington Beach, Rancho Santa Margarita, Santa Ana and Fullerton.

Mehrotra said the next fundraiser they are planning will benefit people who were recently released from California prisons.

In an effort to become more involved in local politics, the nonprofit is hosting a virtual town hall on Sept. 19 with Irvine Councilwoman Farrah Khan, who is running for mayor.

Part of the political awareness aspect of the nonprofit also includes pitching op-ed pieces written by students to media outlets, putting together a comprehensive voter guide for state and O.C. elections and launching a podcast centered on conversations with local community leaders.

This year's civil rights and health climate shined a spotlight on the organization.

"The Black Lives Matter movement definitely helped sort of get that spark that allowed our organization to do even more. And it was especially helpful given the fact that we were all virtual and we were still able to do all of these different types of things," Mehrotra said. "That's what helped draw people to our organization specifically because they started hearing about these issues."

It's no surprise to his family that Mehrotra started the nonprofit since they are politically active. His older sister developed a startup called JusticeText, a video management tool that allows public defenders to easily process their video evidence.

Mehrotra has a lot of work going on. He is finalizing a list of colleges he'd like to apply to. So far it's a mix of UCs and his dream school, Columbia University.

"I don't see O.C. Justice Project going anywhere after I leave for college. Cause I think that there is such a strong, passionate group of individuals — a lot of them are freshmen. It'll definitely continue," he said.

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