

## After he was released from prison, a former convict was detained by ICE for 9 months:

## This is his story

BY VERA CASTANEDA

**T**in Nguyen slept in on Christmas Eve 2018. It was a light sleep. Nguyen says at California State Prison in Lancaster you sleep light for your own safety.

He heard his cell number, 144, prison number, 06, and last name called over the mic. His door popped open and he ran to the prison's tower.

"Are you sure?" he asked to double-check that he had been summoned. A guard confirmed.

Nguyen's sentence, life without possibility of parole, had been commuted by Gov.

Jerry Brown.

"I was so happy — on cloud nine that day," Nguyen said. "It was chaotic. I just ran around giving hugs to everybody."

The now 48-year-old was convicted of first-degree murder in 1999 and had two additional convictions in California for under the influence of a controlled substance in 1994 and extortion in 1995. He served more than 20 years in prison and has since said he feels remorse for his crimes.

Although he had applied and interviewed for commutation, the decision was

unexpected. He thought he would die in Lancaster. There were other prisoners who also ran to the tower because they misheard their name over the mic. Nguyen said the image of the prisoners' shoulders slumped as they walked back to their cells stays with him.

A year later, Nguyen was escorted out of prison as a parolee. Most parolees met their families outside of the prison gates, but Nguyen was shackled and escorted into a U.S. Immigration and Customs

See *Nguyen*, page R4

**TIN NGUYEN**, 48 of Los Angeles, a Vietnamese refugee who was convicted of murder and spent 23 years in California prisons, is shown at Cal State Los Angeles on Dec. 15. Nguyen, who was released from prison in 2019, began college in 2016 while in prison and is still enrolled.

Raul Roa | Staff Photographer

### Q&A



Gustavo Arellano | Los Angeles Times

**SANTA ANA** Mayor Vicente Sarmiento replaces a 26-year incumbent, Miguel Pulido.

## New Santa Ana mayor aims to improve pandemic response

BY BEN BRAZIL

This year's election was historic for Santa Ana as Vicente Sarmiento replaced outgoing Mayor Miguel Pulido, who termed out after 26 years.

Sarmiento ran as possibly the first Bolivian American mayoral candidate, and earned the trust of voters with a platform that put Santa Ana's most vulnerable residents front and center.

Sarmiento, who served three terms on the City Council, is taking the reins amid skyrocketing COVID-19 numbers and the economic crisis it caused.

TimesOC spoke with Sarmiento about his plans and goals.

**Q** What are some of the main issues you are looking to take on during your term?

**A** The first issue is probably going to be the one that's going to consume most of our attention and time — at least in the first weeks and months of my tenure — is the COVID crisis in Santa Ana.

The city has a disproportionately high number of positive cases relative to the rest of the county ... Santa Ana has some ZIP Codes ranging above 20% positivity rate. Our initial efforts will be to provide resources, support and testing to make sure our community gets help. That is probably going to be Priority One.

On the tail end we are going to have to be tackling the economic crisis. We see a lot of businesses struggling, and in some cases failing, during these past nine months. That will be my concurrent effort, to get people healthy and deal with the public health crisis, but also try to provide relief and support for our small businesses to make sure they survive this very difficult economic crisis as well.

**Q** Do you have some specific ideas or programs planned to tackle these things?

**A** For the public health crisis, I think we have been very successful in providing the testing and ancillary resources and bringing those to neighborhoods that have been impacted. We embedded ourselves through our CARES Act team in the ZIP Codes with the highest positivity rate ... We have taken the services and sup-

See *Mayor*, page R5

## O.C. wedding planners grow new business during the pandemic selling plant pots

BY AGNES CONSTANTE

Diana Flores and Ione Martinez were gearing up for their biggest year as wedding planners.

After having met in August 2019 at a wedding where Flores had been hired as the planner and Martinez as the florist, the two decided to join forces and work together on future weddings. Between the two of them, they had every weekend in 2020 booked.

Everyone was trying to get married this year, Santa Ana resident Martinez, 30, said. Many couples

she worked with said they believed tying the knot in 2020 would bring good luck.

But when the country began shutting down in March due to the coronavirus pandemic, they had to reschedule nearly all their weddings to 2021.

"It was an instant kick to the gut," Flores, 33, an Anaheim resident, said. "I couldn't collect on invoices. Everything halted in my life. I didn't know what to do."

The business didn't qualify for government assistance and Flores and Martinez weren't eligible for

unemployment or loans, she said. They weren't provided with an explanation why, though Martinez suspects it may be because both she and Flores are the sole employees of their businesses.

Flores said the impact of the pandemic extended beyond her income. It also took a toll on her emotional well-being as she dealt with couples who were left with no choice but to cancel and postpone their weddings, she said.

So, like many people who

See *Planners*, page R3



Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

**WEDDING PLANNERS** Ione Martinez, 30, left, and Diana Flores, 33, stand inside their newly opened store, Haus of Belles in Garden Grove.



# UCI-led study reveals nuance to experiences of undocumented students across California

BY VERA CASTANEDA

Numbers, whether in the form of pay scales, revenue or surveys, tend to move the needle when it comes to policies and practices.

That's what a UC Irvine-led study aims to do — provide insightful findings to help university administrators meet the needs of undocumented students.

The report, published this month, surveyed about 1,300 undocumented undergraduates who attended UC and Cal State school systems during spring 2020. The results take stock of how undocumented immigration status disrupts their educational experiences and well-being.

Although more than two-thirds of undocumented students have a 3.0 GPA or higher, they are struggling outside of the classroom.

Those students' main concern is meeting financial obligations, with 96% reporting worrying about not having enough money and about half at least sometimes going without materials needed for their studies.

Enriquez, the report's lead study author, started researching undocumented students when she arrived at UCI as an associate professor of Chicano/Latino studies. She published her results in 2015 through the Undocumented Student Equity Project.

Since the initial wave of data from 2015, Enriquez and Annie Ro, UCI assistant professor in public health, have been focused on undocumented students' mental health conditions, needs and experiences.

In the 2020 study, 31% of student respondents to the online survey reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression at a level that warranted clinical treatment.

During the academic year, 72% felt they needed to see a professional to deal with their mental health, emotions or nerves. Only 48% of respondents said they sought support.

"This is a really sensitive period for a lot of mental health disorders for young adults, generally, and college students, especially," Ro said.

"Given the age, mental health is a really important outcome to look at."

Enriquez said campuses have initiatives addressing mental health needs in general, however undocumented students might not utilize those services because of mental health stigma, not wanting to reveal their immigration status to therapists or not having access to a therapist who is aware of immigration-related issues.

Some of the proposed solutions in the study suggest universities should provide funding for experts to train mental health counselors, increase collaboration between undocumented student services and mental health counseling centers and perform campus-specific evaluations on possible barriers to mental health support.

Ro pointed out that other than being the largest study of its kind in terms of diverse student participation across both UC and Cal State systems, the report also shows nuance and agency in undocumented students.



**LAURA ENRIQUEZ**, assistant professor of Chicano/Latino studies, is the lead for a UCI-led study profiling undocumented students.

Courtesy of Steve Zylus | UCI

The majority of students actively seek support from undocumented student centers, legal services and food banks.

Although members of this student population don't have the right to vote in elections and aren't eligible for many government support services, researchers found 29% participated in an organization that tried to solve a social problem, 41% spent time participating in community service or volunteer activity and 79% reported talking to

people to persuade them about voting for or against certain politicians or political issues.

"That's part of the narrative that we have about undocumented youth activism — that they're active ... I didn't realize how pervasive that number would be. It's really important to recognize the political power there," Enriquez said.

The study was a collaboration with UC Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity initiative and the Undocu-

mented Student Equity Project. The team included colleagues from UC Irvine, UC Riverside, UC Merced and eight Cal State campuses, including Fullerton.

A second report, focusing on UC students only, will compare the findings to U.S. citizen students with undocumented parents and U.S. citizen students with legal immigrant parents. It's expected to be published next month.

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## Chapman University president self-isolating at home after testing positive for coronavirus

BY SARA CARDINE

As Chapman University students crammed for exams last week before the end of fall semester, President Daniele Struppa announced he was self-isolating at home after testing positive for the coronavirus.

"I want to share the news that today I tested positive for COVID-19," Struppa began in a Dec. 16 message to staff, faculty and students. "I am feeling tired and am resting at home, but overall, my symptoms are not extreme and currently limited to a slight fever and cough."

Struppa, 65, said he likely caught the virus from his 16-year-old daughter, who'd tested positive on Monday, the same day he himself began experiencing symptoms.

Given the timing of everything, Struppa estimated his window of contagion likely began sometime around Dec. 12.

"Since the stay-at-home order, my contact with the community has been very limited," he continued. "I am working with our contact tracing team to ensure we identify any possible exposure so we can limit the possible spread."

Early in the pandemic, Chapman University officials established a line of succession in the event senior staff members should fall ill or become incapacitated, Struppa said in the announcement.

The move was made to ensure the institution would "continue to function smoothly during this



Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

**CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY** President Daniele Struppa, center, with wife Lisa Sparks at a November 2019 event.

period."

In a follow-up video made Dec. 17, the president thanked students, staff and faculty for their overwhelming comments and correspondences conveying their support. He said his daughter's best friend had also been stricken by coronavirus and, since her parents were out of town, was staying with them.

"We now three corona people in this house — it's definitely the house of corona," he said.

According to an online dashboard intended to track the number of confirmed coronavirus cases on campus, as of Tuesday, a total of 44 infected individuals were identified, including five students living on campus, 33 students living off campus, four staff members and two faculty members.

A resident of Newport Beach, Struppa is married to Orange County Board of

Education member Lisa Sparks. In July, the board approved a recommendation to reopen county public schools without mask and social-distancing mandates, with Sparks voting in favor of the measure.

Lawyers representing the county school board in August filed a lawsuit with the state Supreme Court challenging Gov. Gavin Newsom's authority to issue health orders during an emergency, but the court ultimately refused to hear the matter.

Struppa said he planned to self-isolate and work remotely from home in the coming weeks.

"Thank you for your affection and for your prayers," he said in his video message, recorded in his bedroom-turned-office. "I look forward to seeing you all again pretty soon."

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Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

**AN ORANGE COUNTY** Transportation Agency (OCTA) bus.

## OCTA urges state to place transit workers in second vaccine tier

Orange County's transit authority is calling on Gov. Gavin Newsom to prioritize transit workers as the state rolls out COVID-19 vaccinations.

The agency considers its employees essential, frontline workers.

"Transportation is vital for our community, for all the essential workers, for the public's ability to access healthcare, buy food, or get to school, and because of this we join with agencies throughout California in requesting that OCTA's frontline workers receive the vaccine as early as possible," Darrell E. Johnson, chief executive of the Orange County Transportation Authority, said in a news release.

OCTA officials praised a federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention committee for recommending Dec. 20 that bus drivers, rail operators and other transit workers re-

ceive priority for inoculations nationwide.

In California, medical workers and nursing home residents are at the front of the line. They are part of what state labels Phase IA.

On Dec. 20, the CDC committee voted to place transit and other frontline essential workers in Phase 1B, the second priority tier.

California has placed senior citizens aged 65 and up in Tier 1B, as well as essential workers, but not all of the jobs in that category have been publicly defined.

OCTA and other transit agencies statewide have joined in urging the state to consider public transportation employees frontline workers.

"Public transportation has proven to be a daily lifeline for thousands of essential workers in our community, throughout

the state and nationwide and we thank the CDC for this recommendation to help ensure the health of all the men and women who are safely operating our transit systems," OCTA Chairman Steve Jones said in the news release.

"As we experience the most difficult days of the pandemic, but with hope on the horizon, we respectfully ask the state to do all it can to protect the employees who keep Orange County and the rest of California moving."

OCTA is taking steps to keep the public transportation system as safe as possible, according to officials.

Buses are cleaned daily and there are on-board hand sanitizing and face-covering dispensers.

Passenger loads are limited to ensure social distancing and drivers are protected by plexiglass.

— From staff reports

## Broadway series set to return to Segerstrom Center for the Arts in the fall and continue into 2022

Delayed by the pandemic, the Segerstrom Center for the Arts' Broadway series is slated to return in fall 2021 and continue into 2022, the theater announced this week.

"Mean Girls," "Tootsie," "Pretty Woman: The Musical," "Hadestown," "My Fair Lady," "The Band's Visit" and "Wicked" are among the touring productions of popular shows on the roster.

More productions are expected to be announced early next year.

The schedule, to date, is as follows:

- "Mean Girls," Oct. 26-Nov. 7, 2021
- "My Fair Lady," Jan. 11-23, 2022
- "Wicked," Feb. 9-March 6, 2022
- "The Band's Visit," March 22-April 3, 2022
- "Tootsie," May 31-June 12, 2022
- "Pretty Woman: The Musical," July 5-17, 2022
- "Hadestown," Aug. 9-21,

2022.

"Mean Girls," "Tootsie," "Pretty Woman" and "Hadestown" are each center premiers.

Many of the scheduled 2020 performances, including "Mean Girls," were delayed or canceled as the novel coronavirus swept Orange County and the nation.

"I am thrilled to be able to confirm that our beloved Broadway shows will return with this spectacular lineup," center President Casey Reitz said in a news release.

The recently approved coronavirus vaccines gave center leadership confidence they could again stage touring productions.

"Show producers and our presenting colleagues across the country feel strongly the promise of effective COVID-19 vaccines will make it safe for companies to tour safely and audiences to return to theaters to enjoy their favorite shows once again," Reitz

said.

"To our patrons, the center extends its deepest thanks who have been so patient during the past nine months. I cannot tell you how eager we are to welcome them back to the center."

Segerstrom is equipping the Costa Mesa venue with equipment and technology aimed at making theater-going safer, including "air ventilation and circulation filtering systems and hands-free restroom fixtures," as well as hand-sanitizing stations, according to the news release.

Box-office purchases and check-in at the doors will also be hands-free.

Refunds for canceled shows were made available but season subscribers who did not request a refund will see their tickets transferred to the upcoming series.

For more information, visit [scfta.org/Home.aspx](http://scfta.org/Home.aspx).  
— From staff reports

## Los Alamitos Race Course owner threatens to close the track for good

BY JOHN CHERWA

The owner of Los Alamitos Race Course said he is withdrawing his application to run a nighttime quarter-horse and thoroughbred meeting next year and planned to stop racing, which could lead to the property being sold and developed.

He made the announcement before the California Horse Racing Board voted on Dec. 17 to grant the track a six-month license instead of one for a full year.

Ed Allred said the track cannot operate with a guarantee of only six months of racing because owners and trainers have to make plans for an entire year. Under the CHRB ruling, Los Alamitos would have to undergo another license application starting July 1.

"Los Alamitos will be requesting reconsideration of the action taken by the board and hopes that its request will be acted on in an expedited manner," said Jack Liebau, the track's vice president.

The move by the board was headed by vice-chairman Oscar Gonzales, who balked at giving the track a yearlong license in light of the number of horse fatali-



Gina Ferazzi | Los Angeles Times

**HORSES LEAVE** the starting gate at Los Alamitos Race Course during a race in July 2014.

ties this year. The track has had 29 racing or training fatalities since Dec. 27, when its season began.

Gonzales' proposal first ended in a tie. Another motion that would have granted a yearlong license with a review at six months also ended in a tie. Gonzales, who has worked on both the federal and state level, stressed there is a big difference between "review and approval."

He was able to persuade board members to come to his side after the two tie votes, and his proposal won in a 5-1 vote with Chairman Greg Ferraro casting the dissenting vote.

Ferraro called the move "a mistake."

Los Alamitos has a license to run its nighttime quarter-horse and thoroughbred meeting starting Saturday.

If Allred follows through and closes the track, it would likely be the end of quarter-horse racing in California. In addition, the track is authorized to run seven daytime thoroughbred weeks next year and the track stables hundreds of horses that run at Santa Anita and other tracks.

**JOHN CHERWA** is a special contributor to the Los Angeles Times.



# O.C. nonprofit aims to help ex-cons reintegrate

BY BEN BRAZIL

As more inmates are released from Orange County jails, they face reentering a community besieged by a deadly virus and an economic crisis.

Securing a job and stable housing as an ex-convict was no easy feat even prior to the pandemic.

Now, the task is all the more daunting as employment opportunities dwindle and support services that were once provided are suspended.

"A lot of the jobs that people get when they are trying to reenter society are not there, so it's more difficult for these people to get back on their feet," said Deputy Public Defender Bobby Waltman. "And if they can't get back on their feet, they're back in that cycle of desperation that leads to crime."

But a new nonprofit aims to help solve this crisis by acting as a hub to connect youth and adults who have been incarcerated with the treatment, training and employment opportunities they need to reintegrate into society.

The Hub for Integration, Reentry and Employment (H.I.R.E.) will work to remove the social, economic and political barriers that ex-convicts and juvenile

delinquents face.

"A lot of people just need a second chance," said Meghan Medlin, founder and chief executive of HIRE. "And if you give them a second chance, they will be successful."

The nonprofit is looking to unify Orange County stakeholders, community members and service providers to offer referrals and programs to former inmates looking for help.

Medlin said the organization is "hugely needed" due to the county's high jail population and deficit of available services.

The work is all the more important as Orange County Sheriff Don Barnes was recently ordered by a judge to reduce the county jail population by half, though he is fighting the order.

Hundreds of inmates have already been released since the beginning of the pandemic.

"Many of these people they don't have a car, they don't have a phone, they don't have a computer, and now they need to get a job and get a place to live," said Waltman, a member of the nonprofit's board of directors.

"Many of them don't have family support or their family has kind of given up on them. So we're

hoping that by providing one central hub instead of them having to run all over the county ... we can provide that one place that links them to all of these different areas of their life to get back the stability they need to stay out of trouble."

Medlin said people will be able to come to HIRE for a number of problems including treatment for substance abuse, homelessness and training for those who lack the proficiency or technical prowess for holding down a job.

"Our number one issue here in Orange County is housing," Medlin said. "There's just a lack of housing. Then when you have people that have certain convictions that aren't able to even qualify for housing, it's difficult if you don't have a home, you know, to be able to even get a job or to get services."

The fledgling organization officially launched in early August and has some scaling to do.

Medlin said the nonprofit is currently comprised of her and the board of directors. It just received approval to begin pursuing grants and will be holding a fundraiser in the coming months.

The nonprofit is sponsored by Charitable Ven-



Alexander Gallardo | Los Angeles Times

**A GUARD STANDS** at the front gate of the James A. Musick Facility in Irvine.

tures, an O.C. nonprofit that fiscally sponsors local charities.

H.I.R.E. currently has a handful of clients. Medlin has been working with them virtually as the nonprofit doesn't have a location yet.

"Obviously, once we get funding we want to have an actual community center where people can come for assistance as well as our collaborative partners can come to offer workshops or resources to people," Medlin said.

Medlin has been focusing largely on community development and fostering

connections with service providers.

The work is familiar to Medlin, who previously worked to reduce local recidivism rates while leading Orange County's reentry partnership.

Other than Medlin, the board shares a number of diverse advocates and community members.

During Waltman's six years in the Orange County Public Defender's office, he's learned through the experiences of his clients.

"I've had a chance to work in homeless court and drug court and have seen how services can really pro-

vide stability for my clients and give them a chance to turn it around," Waltman said. "... I just wish all my clients could have that kind of help."

He continued: "That's the goal, to try to fill that gap, provide these services and give these people a better shot at getting back on their feet, because they want to. They just need help doing it."

To donate to H.I.R.E., visit [charitableventuresoc.kindful.com/?campaign=1102287](http://charitableventuresoc.kindful.com/?campaign=1102287).

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## PLANNERS

Continued from page R1

found themselves at home during quarantine, she turned her attention to a new hobby: plant parenting.

As she poured time and care toward her plants throughout the next couple of months, Flores grew particularly fond of her fiddle fig tree (which she named Mariah), a giant monstera and Congo. Her apartment has become home to about two dozen plants that mostly occupy the patio of her apartment.

"I feel like plants have become therapy and have given me this distraction I needed instead of feeling sad and depressed with what's going on," she said. "It's been fun watching them grow."

Her new hobby also birthed an idea for a side business that has ended up becoming her primary source of income: a store that sells plant pots.

While a number of people began establishing plant businesses during the pandemic, including Hojas de Amor and Amolie Succulents, there didn't seem to be many who sold pots, Flores said. Even she and Martinez struggled to find ones they wanted for their plants.

So the duo, along with another friend of theirs, Alejandra Quiroa, started selling pots in the summer through Instagram. Within a month, their account saw its following grow to 1,000, Flores said.

They also made sales at pop-up events, the first of which took place in August at a friend's hair salon.

The most popular plant pot they sold among the approximately 100 people who showed up throughout the course of three hours that day was a matte blush pot called Kendall, Martinez said.

Sales from Instagram and their pop-up events went well enough that on Nov. 27, Flores, Martinez and Quiroa opened a brick and mortar location for their shop, Haus of Belles, at 11372 Trask Ave., Suite I-109, Garden Grove.

It was a scary endeavor for Flores and Martinez, both of whom had never done anything retail oriented, Martinez said.

Prior to event planning, Flores worked as an aerospace engineer.

Martinez had interned at event planning companies in her early 20s and then spent five years running a food truck called Sexy Burger.

Both eventually decided to create their own event planning businesses, something they're both passionate about and has provided them with flexibility to care for their young children.

Martinez said the 600-square foot shop saw about 50 people that day, a number that was dictated in part by pandemic restric-



**SUCCULENT PLANTS** at Haus of Belles in Garden Grove.

Kevin Chang  
Staff  
Photographer

tions on in-person shopping.

Haus of Belles primarily focuses on plant pots, but it has expanded to offer some less commonly found plants, handmade soaps, succulents, art, masks and body scrubs. It also sells vintage décor curated by Quiroa. Many of its vendors are women-owned businesses who work from home, Flores said.

Since the grand opening, Haus of Belles has seen about 35 customers per day, all of whom can only shop in-store by appointment.

New pandemic restrictions have caused the business to shift to online orders and curbside pickup, but it's a change that has been positive for the plant shop.

Martinez said it seems that many people are showing increasing support for small businesses, which Haus of Belles has benefited from. She has seen community members pro-

mote their social media accounts and noted that a sizable number of its sales are driven by Facebook and Instagram.

The earlier months of the pandemic were challenging for Flores, Martinez and Quiroa. They all struggled with the uncertainty of what would come next.

"At the beginning of pandemic, we were like, 'What are we going to do with our lives?'" Martinez said.

Now, the trio has focused their attention on Haus of Belles. And once the pandemic comes to an end, they plan to continue running the shop alongside their event-planning business.

"We're just super excited for when things will start picking up again and everything will be buzzing and super busy," Martinez said. "It's just really exciting to look forward to and be hopeful for the future."

**AGNES CONSTANTE** is a contributor to TimesOC.

## TimesOC

A Times Community News publication serving Orange County

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TimesOC is published Sundays by Times Community News, a division of the Los Angeles Times. Subscriptions are available only by subscribing to The Times, Orange County.  
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## NGUYEN

Continued from page R1

Enforcement (ICE) van.

He arrived in the U.S. from Vietnam at 6 years old in 1979. Nguyen didn't speak English at the time and struggled to find a sense of belonging. He grew up in Pomona and at one point joined a Vietnamese gang.

His first run-ins with ICE happened around his arrests in the '90s. But in 2008 (while Nguyen was serving his prison sentence), the U.S. and Vietnam signed an agreement that excludes Vietnamese nationals who arrived in the U.S. before July 12, 1995, from being subject to deportation. Many of those who arrived before that date were refugees of the Vietnam War.

"I wouldn't know what to do [if I were deported]," Nguyen said. "I'd do my best to survive, but the stress of unemployment, not having the command of the language and the culture shock — it's gonna be a high stress factor on my life and on my rehabilitation."

In an ongoing lawsuit filed in 2018, nonprofits Asian Americans Advancing Justice — Los Angeles, Asian Americans Advancing Justice — Atlanta and Asian Americans Advancing Justice — Asian Law Caucus, assert that ICE was unlawfully detaining Vietnamese immigrants. Typically, ICE had released pre-1995 Vietnamese immigrants with final orders of removal within 90 days of detention but began re-arresting those individuals in March 2017 detaining them for lengthy periods.

Nguyen thought he'd spend about three months in the Adelanto ICE Processing Center, a facility in San Bernardino County. Instead, he'd spent nine months in detention.

### ADELANTO

The detention facility in Adelanto is one of four private-run institutions in Southern California. The GEO Group-owned detention center holds people who have overstayed visas, arrived in the country



Irfan Khan | Los Angeles Times

**DETAINEES HAVE** long accused Adelanto Detention Facility of medical neglect, poor treatment by guards, lack of response to complaints and other problems.

illegally or are permanent residents who committed crimes while immigration judges decide whether they should be deported.

In the past, the GEO Group company has been sued repeatedly over allegations of violence, and it has been the subject of federal reports over failures to keep detainees safe.

Last year, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a bill banning private prisons and immigration detention centers, like Adelanto, from operating in California. The bill prevents the state from entering into or renewing contracts with for-profit prison companies after Jan. 1, 2020, and phases out such facilities by 2028.

Nguyen said Adelanto was similar to prison in the sense that there are factions. When he arrived, Adelanto detainees asked him who he ran with — the paisanos (non-English speakers) or the homies (English-speakers who were gang members).

"Since I don't participate in gangs no more I just told them, I run on my own. I'm Asian. I just want to walk that way," Nguyen said. "At first they kind of pushed me a little bit. But they left me alone eventually."

He made a few friends in

both groups, communicating with Spanish-only speakers using gestures and an English-to-Spanish translation book. He was also housed in the same dorm with an immigrant from Vietnam who didn't speak English.

Nguyen said the only way he could describe his experience in the Adelanto facility is as demeaning — from the way he was addressed by guards, the bureaucratic runaround of his immigration case to watching those with a language barrier unable to represent themselves.

"Even when I was a criminal, a [police] officer or the Jan. 1, 2020, and phases out such facilities by 2028. Nguyen said Adelanto was similar to prison in the sense that there are factions. When he arrived, Adelanto detainees asked him who he ran with — the paisanos (non-English speakers) or the homies (English-speakers who were gang members)."

Prison made sense to Nguyen. He committed a crime and was serving time. He also had a productive routine. Nguyen would wake up, pick up his dog from the Paws for Life program and take care of her before heading to work. After work, he'd go to school through Cal State L.A.'s Lancaster Prison

Program. Then he'd pick up his dog again, take her out for a walk and end the day by watching a movie.

In Adelanto, they'd open up the cell doors at 6 in the morning and close them near 1 a.m. There were showers, phones, books and two TVs.

"I came from an active life to just sitting around watching TV all day," Nguyen said.

One TV was for Spanish speakers and the other TV was dedicated to English speakers. He found out about COVID-19 by watching broadcast news.

Nguyen said he saw guards put up social-distancing signs, take a photo and then take the signs down. When hand-sanitizing dispensers were installed, he found they were empty. Six feet of social distancing was impossible during the time he was in Adelanto. Surfaces such as tables and showers were sprayed but not wiped down, he said.

Alexx Pons, a spokesman for ICE, stated in an email that "ICE has taken proactive measures to tailor conditions across its detention network to maintain safe and secure environments for detainees and staff since the onset of the

pandemic, while adhering to guidelines for the prevention and control of infectious and communicable diseases from the CDC. This includes reducing the overall detained population, providing appropriate hygiene products and personal protective equipment (PPE) to all staff and detainees, suspending social visitation, and maximizing social-distancing practices with staggered meals and recreation times."

Pons referred to ICE's website for details on its pandemic response requirements.

ICE has come under scrutiny for its response to the virus, including officials refusing to allow all of Adelanto detainees to be tested.

During Nguyen's last month in detention he was under lockdown because there was a coronavirus outbreak in the Adelanto facility. A day after his release, a judge ordered the Adelanto facility to reduce population to allow social distancing after a months-long battle over the safety of detainees.

As of Dec. 20, the Adelanto facility listed 264 confirmed COVID-19 cases and zero deaths. According to ICE's online database updated on Dec. 14, 351 detainees with criminal charges or convictions were released in California under judicial order.

### THE CASE FOR RELEASE

In Los Angeles and Orange counties, attorneys, Nguyen's family and community organizers rallied for his release.

Nguyen had been in touch with attorneys from O'Melveny & Myers LLP since his time in Lancaster prison. Taffany Lim, senior director of Cal State L.A.'s Center for Engagement, Service, & the Public Good, connected Nguyen to attorneys when she reached out to her college roommate, Laurel Loomis Rimon.

"Tin had really stood out and had the support of everyone — from the governor through the commutation of his sentence, to professors at Cal State L.A., to the people he worked with in the program for dog

training. He had a very compelling story," Rimon, O'Melveny & Myers attorney and partner, said.

His three attorneys, which also included Alex Duran and Ben Seelig, tried multiple legal methods for release, including a habeas corpus petition.

They also wanted to make his case more public and reached out to O.C.-based VietRISE as well as Asian Americans Advancing Justice and CARECEN.

"After several months on this into the summer of 2020, we were going to file a habeas petition ... we thought that there should also be an element of the Vietnamese community and the Vietnamese diaspora supporting him as well," Seelig said. "VietRISE is a young organization that understands social media and connects some of those cultural issues that we don't focus on since we're only really honed into the legal side of it. They took on Tin's campaign, and we really think they cracked it open."

VietRISE was created in 2018 to advocate for social justice with Vietnamese and immigrant communities at the center through youth organizing, arts and culture engagement and, more significantly for Nguyen, campaigns to advance immigration justice.

For the organization's Bring Tin Home campaign, the first of its kind for VietRISE, they created a public petition and received support from local officials and congressional leaders. It also held a news conference in front of the ICE Santa Ana office where Nguyen's mother and sister were able to voice their frustrations.

"We know that Tin has done a lot of work," Tracy La, VietRISE executive director, said. "In his 20 years of incarceration. He did a lot of interviews and he was known by a lot of people across the state and across the country for the work that he did. The stories that he tells resonated with a lot of Southeast Asian refugees who faced racism and abuse as kids

See **Nguyen**, page R5

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**NGUYEN**

*Continued from page R4*

and joined gangs as a result. I think all of that played a huge role in why his story was hit so hard.”

VietRISE received a lot of messages through email, Facebook and Instagram from people who knew Nguyen while he was incarcerated in Lancaster as well as first-generation O.C. residents and beyond.

“Many of the communities we work with have had some kind of contact with ICE, either through being detained or having family members who are detained,” La said. “We have a relief fund, where we’ve been able to provide some type of financial assistance to those who are undocumented. These are the folks that make up the majority of the people we work with.”

The campaign started in early September and ended about two weeks in when VietRISE was notified Nguyen was going to be released.

Seelig said they thought they would have to litigate for weeks, if not months. But Nguyen’s lawyers were in the middle of a meeting with the government attorney discussing the habeas corpus petition on Sept. 25 when they received an email saying Nguyen was going to be released the following Monday.

“Throughout the case, we found it hard to get a full assessment of what the process behind the scenes was for getting contractual documents for how decisions pertaining to [Ngu-

yen’s] custody were made,” Seelig said. “Even through our interactions with the government attorney, it seemed like he was somewhat in the dark as well. I think it’s the broader policy towards these pre-1995 individuals as to whether they’re detainable ... or whether it’s a case by case basis. It’s still a mystery to us.”

Duran added that “pre-1995 Vietnamese immigrants are not removed very often and there’s ongoing litigation” referring to the class action lawsuit filed by Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

Carissa Cutrell, ICE spokesperson, stated “as of Dec. 12, there were 86 Vietnamese nationals in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody.”

**POST-RELEASE**

On the day of his release from detention, Nguyen said he fell to his knees, cried and apologized to his family as soon as he got off of Adelanto detention property.

He had a panic attack during the drive from Adelanto to his transitional housing location in East L.A. His new cell phone was buzzing with texts and calls congratulating him and his ankle monitor started vibrating because it had a low battery.

“Everything was moving too fast,” Nguyen said.

For now, he plans to live in transitional housing for an entire year even though only six months are required.

Nguyen likes to wake up early in the morning to go



*Don Leach | Staff Photographer*

**TRACY LA**, executive director of VietRISE, stands in the organization’s Westminster office. The organization’s Bring Tin Home campaign created a public petition and received support from local officials and congressional leaders.

jogging. Whenever he can, he goes to Cal State L.A. to volunteer. He helps staff reply to letters from prisoners seeking to enroll in college courses, the same program he participated through Lancaster prison.

He needs two more classes to complete his bachelor’s degree in communications study. He likes the sound of “Professor Nguyen” and is entertaining the idea of getting a masters and a doctorate.

“I can’t wait for the campus to open, though. Just walking on the campus and experiencing the atmos-

phere of it,” Nguyen said.

He has his frustrations like not having money and is currently waiting on a work permit to start applying to jobs. But he tries to remind himself that “free people problems are way better than prison people problems.”

Nguyen is learning how to use a smartphone. The lawyers get plenty of texts and photos from him.

“He sent us a picture of his first free sunset ... He’s constantly sending us messages. We think of him as a friend now,” Duran said.

And he’s also catching up on pop culture — watching “The Mandalorian” and “Game of Thrones.”

As someone who read the entire George R.R. Martin’s series in prison, he said the book is better than the show even though Martin never finished writing the ending. He’s already been warned about what some called the disappointing TV series finale.

His deportation status is still pending.

Pons said Nguyen received a final order of removal from an immigration judge on Jan. 14 and “re-

mains on order of supervision while he awaits the resolution of his removal proceedings.” Whether immigration officials will be able to get travel documents from Vietnam is yet to be seen according to Nguyen’s lawyers.

Nguyen is looking forward to spending Christmas with his family, even though he might just be standing outside in the yard of his mother’s Chino Hills home, waving from a safe social distance.

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**MAYOR**

*Continued from page R1*

port directly to the neighborhoods.

It’s maybe a bit more cumbersome and challenging but we have seen people have responded well and trust when you are actually knocking at their door and saying you want to help them with rental assistance and protective gear.

All those things are a different way of providing services to people. We have found it to be very successful in Santa Ana because we have an issue with residents trusting and being able to access support and resources.

**Q Are there any programs you’d want to expand?**

**A** What we would like to do is use funding a little bit more intelligently for small businesses, be a little bit more surgical with the monies we have as opposed to just putting it out there and using a blunt instrument and making it available to folks on a first-come, first-served basis.

I think we really need to identify those businesses that may not have been able to open since March 15 or those that have had limited openings and try to find them and provide those grants and monies to them so they can sustain themselves.

In the past I think the way it’s been done is to just make the grants available, but sometimes it doesn’t reach those who are most vulnerable and most impacted. What I’d like to do is identify those businesses that are really really struggling.

**Q Are there some shortcomings from the past mayor in dealing with the pandemic that you think you can improve on?**

**A** I think there are, just because the community needed to be reassured that their local government is present and able and willing to help. I think the outgoing mayor, my predecessor, was probably not as visible as maybe he could have been.

Simply by being at food distribution efforts and resource fairs gives a lot of comfort to residents knowing that their elected officials, and especially their mayor, [are] sympathetic and compassionate and concerned about what is going on with their lives.

The second part of that is really trying to do as much as you can to bring resources to the city because we are so different from the other [33] cities ... We have a high population of Latino essential workers that have underlying health conditions. That is a formula for some real serious conse-

quences.

Advocating for more-focused efforts for here in these communities would have been more helpful, and trying to accelerate the funding to get to us. We went months without getting anything and it was really troubling.

**Q So you will plan to be more present in the community?**

**A** Yeah, and I have been throughout this pandemic. Since it started, we realized that the food insecurity and the need is so high that people do feel reassured that they have not only these food distribution efforts but also local government that is supporting that.

So when it comes to offering rental assistance, help with utility bills, testing and all these other things, they are all based upon trust. If the residents don’t trust the source, then they won’t access them. I think they have to see that you are present and you are there supporting these efforts thereby making them credible and accessible.

**Q What do you think needs to be done to get those COVID numbers down?**

**A** I think it’s a combination of two things that need to be done. One of them is just really instilling this sense of urgency in the community that they need to for the next few months understand that these are going to probably be the darkest months of the pandemic... It is instilling not a sense of fear but a sense of urgency that they need to do everything they can.

We are going to be kicking off a campaign in partnership with Santa Ana Unified, the county and Latino Health Access on Thursday to push that out to the entire city, especially those communities where we have seen those numbers spiral up.

The second thing is compliance. Some businesses are good actors and have been complying to their detriment. Then there’s some others businesses — because there is mixed messages from folks like the sheriff in Orange County — saying they are not going to enforce the state orders.

I think that is very challenging for those of us in cities like Santa Ana that are impacted so heavily. We are trying to tell folks, ‘Stay home, don’t open up.’

**Q Are there one or two major issues you’d like to focus on aside from the pandemic?**

**A** There’s three or four big issues that I ran really strongly on.

One of them is to address the affordability question when it comes to housing. How do we address the problem of people living sometimes two or three

families to a unit? That tells us these overcrowded conditions aren’t voluntary; they are a consequence of rents increasing and out-pacing salaries and earnings people have in the city.

The other one is over the summer we dealt with a lot of social justice questions and concerns about accountability from our police officers and our public safety staff. We are going to be looking at the question and a civilian oversight board and what that looks like for a city like Santa Ana.

The other one is we have one of the youngest cities in the country. I heard over and over while campaigning and on the council that our youth really feel ignored for a couple of reasons. They feel that they are not heard and listened to when it comes to what sort of programming and resources they need. Secondly, they don’t feel there’s a proportionate amount of funding that goes to investing in youth. That will be something I will be very interested in pursuing.

Finally, we have a large immigrant population, many undocumented, and I plan to do what I can to make sure there is good public policy coming out of our community. That will hopefully be an expansion of what we started a few years ago and that’s the deportation defense fund that provides legal counsel to people and families who are in the process of being deported or separated. Those are the four big issues. There are plenty of others.

**Q What are the biggest challenges that stand in the way of you solving those issues?**

**A** I think any time you talk about housing policy it’s always resistance from the apartment owners, and the California Apartment Assn. is a big lobby for the apartment owners. I understand we certainly don’t believe policy should be overly harsh on landlords or property owners but it’s a matter of having balance and making sure we also provide some level of affordability for our families that have lived in our community for years. I think there will be resistance there.

I think a public safety oversight commission or board, I think it polls really high ... If you think about it we spend close to 60% of our general fund on public safety and we don’t have any civilian or resident commission or body that monitors those departments.

We have commissions for arts and culture and historic resources and parks and rec, and so it begs the question as to why the community wouldn’t be involved in at least opining

and having a voice in how their dollars are spent on policing policy.

**Q Do you have ideas on how to tackle the housing affordability crisis in the city?**

**A** We had a pretty effective affordable housing policy but it was watered down in the last four months of the outgoing council’s term. We had a 15% requirement that any market rate development had to have a 15% in-lieu fee paid or 15% of their unit

mix had to be made available for residents that qualify for affordable housing. I am hoping we can get back to that.

**Q Do you think your election signals a change in Santa Ana residents’ thoughts or goals?**

**A** I think there was obviously a clear and decisive margin that we saw in the election not only in the mayoral but the other three council members that were elected. One council member unseated an incumbent

and that doesn’t happen often in Santa Ana. You have the three council members and myself talking about the very issues I just mentioned, which is affordable housing, immigrants rights, having accountability with our police officers and all our employees and investment in youth. Those were some prevailing themes through all four campaigns.

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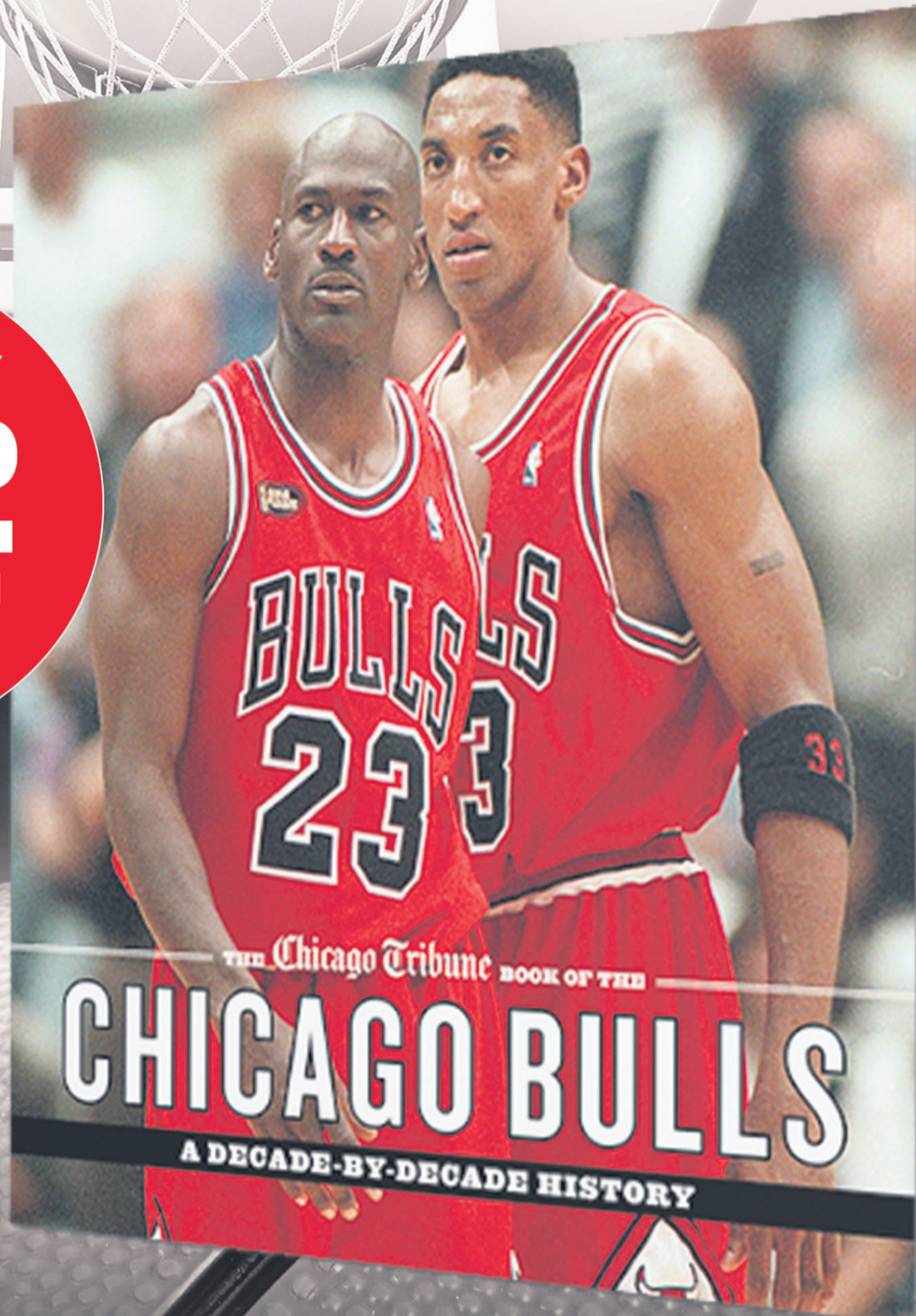
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