

# TimesOC

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## O.C. sees record homeless deaths in 2020

With COVID-19 a contributing factor, 330 people on the streets died last year, according to the coroner's office.

BY BEN BRAZIL

As the pandemic has gripped Orange County for nine months, the homeless have had few places to turn.

Homeless shelters have faced COVID-19 outbreaks and a lawsuit for sexual harassment and inhumane conditions. Project Roomkey, a statewide program that placed the homeless in hotel rooms, was said to be overly restrictive by homeless advocates who likened the hotels and shelters to being run like prisons.

As a result, more homeless people died in Orange County in 2020 than any other year, according to the coroner's office.

The 330 deaths are a reminder that the pandemic has repeatedly struck at the most vulnerable in

**"It's sad because there are more shelters now than before. ... But it's also like some of what was built now doesn't work as well."**

— Father Dennis Kriz  
Local homeless advocate and pastor of a Fullerton church

the community. In 2019, just over 200 homeless people died in Orange County.

"It's sad because there are more shelters now than before," said Father Dennis Kriz, a local homeless advocate and pastor of a Fullerton church. "... But it's also like some of what was built now doesn't work as well. It really is kind of like having built the Maginot Line ..."

Kriz publishes the names and stories of the deceased homeless on the Voice of OC every month. He also used to allow a homeless encampment on his church's grounds despite opposition from parishioners.

Kriz said the the county and cities haven't done enough to keep the homeless safe from the virus.

"It just seems that they continue to not see this as a serious issue," Kriz said. "And it's just a shame because, again, I really do think if they really took it seriously ... they could have this thing solved."

See *Homeless*, page R2



Photos by Edwin Goei

**KICKIN' HOT CHICKEN**, at 5777 E. La Palma Ave., Anaheim, is among the Nashville hot chicken sandwich joints that opened in Orange County last year.

## On the bright side, 2020 was the year of Nashville hot chicken sandwiches

BY EDWIN GOEI

**D**espite devastating setbacks suffered by our local restaurant industry the past nine months, 2020 also turned out to be the year Nashville hot chicken sandwich restaurants flourished in Orange County.

Since March, amid stay-at-home orders, at least seven new hot chicken joints have opened in the county. If you add that tally to those already in business before the crisis, everyone in the county should now be within a 10-minute drive from a Nashville hot chicken sandwich shop.

And that's a good thing, because if there's a shared attribute between all Nashville hot chicken sandwiches — besides the bun, coleslaw, pickles, "comeback sauce," and a fried chicken breast drenched in varying heat levels of spicy oil — it's that travel time is an enemy. The crispiness of the batter is inversely proportional to how long you wait to eat it.

What follows are takeout reviews of the Nashville hot chicken sandwiches from the seven O.C. shops that opened during the pandemic.

Some are mom-n-pops, some are corporate-backed ventures, and at least one is a ghost kitchen developed as a direct response to the COVID-19 shut-downs.

All aspire for the viral success

of Howlin' Ray's in Los Angeles, which took the recipe invented by a scorned Nashville woman trying to punish her unfaithful boyfriend 90 years ago and applied it to the form factor of Chik-fil-A. And judging by the lines at some of these new shops, the concept will soon proliferate to the point of ubiquity, much like poke bowls did a couple of years ago.

And it is no wonder why: The sandwiches are Instagram-friendly, intrinsically portable, and comfortingly familiar since it's essentially equal parts hamburger, fried chicken, and Flamin' Hot Cheetos — things we Americans are already pre-programmed to love.

### CLUCK KITCHEN

17915 MacArthur Blvd, Irvine. Opened July 2020. Cost of one Nashville Hot Chicken Sandwich: \$12.

Cluck Kitchen's Nashville Hot Chicken sandwich is one of the most expensive on this list. But what you get from the Cut's Ryan Yi and Steve Kim's entry is a Foghorn Leghorn among Chicken Littles. Along with being large, the cashier will warn you that the "mild" is considered "medium" everywhere else.

But what really differentiates Cluck's sandwich from the flock is that its coleslaw isn't bogged

See *Chicken*, page R4



**CLUCK KITCHEN'S** Nashville Hot Chicken sandwiches are \$12 each.

## Sherman Library & Gardens tree holds about 4,000 wishes for 2021



Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer

**SOME OF** the thousands of messages on the Sherman Library & Gardens wishing tree this holiday season in Corona del Mar. This time the annual tradition had many more messages due to the pandemic and related issues.

BY VERA CASTANEDA

Some of Orange County's hopes and desires are hanging inside of a 2-acre beachside patch of greenery in Corona del Mar for all to see.

Sherman Library & Gardens set up its annual Wishing Tree, and members of the public — about 4,000 of them — have responded, providing a unique snapshot of the times.

What are people wishing for in 2021?

There are an overwhelming amount of wishes for the coronavirus pandemic to end, a vac-

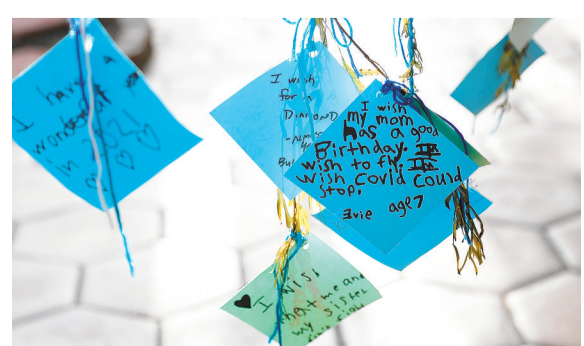
cine to become available and for the nation to come together.

The Wishing Tree in Sherman Gardens started seven years ago along with its Nights of 1,000 Lights holiday event.

At first, staff used a small Japanese maple tree, but as the wishes piled up they expanded to hang on nearly every branch visitors could find. Two years ago, the setup was moved to one of the oldest trees in the garden — a California pepper tree.

"In the beginning, we really wanted it to be a family tradition

See *Tree*, page R5



**ONE OF** more than 1,000 messages on the Sherman Library & Gardens wishing tree this holiday season.

# Orange County's first safe parking program runs out of money

BY BEN BRAZIL

A program that provided safe parking for homeless people living out of their cars recently ended in Fullerton.

The program was the first of its kind in Orange County, which has never had a safe parking program.

Advocates see the program as crucial for the homeless people who used it. As the pandemic economy continues to spiral, they are hoping the county will take a cue from the city of Fullerton and adopt a countywide program to help those in need.

For homeless people who live in their cars, finding a safe place to park is a major obstacle.

With many cities having overnight parking prohibitions, the homeless are forced to park in unsafe areas that put them at risk.

"There should be more safe parking throughout because we know that there are plenty of individuals and families that are living out of their vehicles," said homelessness activist Dave Duran.

"That's going to grow be-

cause of evictions, foreclosures, and because of the lack of jobs. There's going to be a growing need for safe parking as the economy continues to crash due to COVID."

When Fullerton started the safe parking program in November 2019, it was expected to run until the summer. The city was able to extend the program with the help of CARES Act funding. That funding ran out on Dec. 30.

The initial six-month run of the program cost the city about \$80,000. The extension cost the city about \$15,000 per month.

Expenses included bathrooms, hand-washing stations and security.

Fullerton originally contracted with the Illumination Foundation for the first few months, then switched to Pathways of Hope when it extended the program.

"It was a big leap, you know, it hadn't really been done in Orange County ever and for Fullerton to do that was great," said David Gillanders, executive director of Pathways of Hope.

"... We talked to the county, we talked to other

folks about trying to take the program and try to regionalize and make it something bigger.

"But I think right now, there's so many things up in the air that in terms of funding for COVID-related activities and additional homeless dollars, there just wasn't much of an ability to do it. But we're still trying and I think the city of Fullerton has been super supportive of that effort."

Gillanders said the safe parking program also included other support services for the homeless who used it. He said they served about 17 total homeless people and placed three into permanent housing.

The nonprofit also helped pay for car repairs and connected them with services to get food, job training and other resources.

There were about 10 cars and RVs parked in the lot on an ongoing basis.

"The whole design of the program was certainly not to just be a place to park but to be a place that could start the process to do some kind of permanent housing intervention,"

Gillanders said.

Gillanders said there will likely be an influx of people living in their cars in the coming months due to the pandemic economy.

Orange County's homeless have already suffered the most deaths recorded in a single year.

With nonprofit-driven safe parking programs in Los Angeles and San Diego, Gillanders wants to see some action from the county.

"When we talk to representatives of the county, including county supervisors, it's like we're at the point where we saw such value and still see such value in this kind of program existing that we don't even need to be the contracted operator," Gillanders said. "You just need to find a spot to do this. You need to rally the resources and find a parking lot."

Fullerton City Manager Ken Domer said the city will work on compiling statistics to determine how well the program worked.

"So sadly, it's hardly ever about the humanity of things, it's more often about the dollars and cents," Du-

ran said. "But even so, I'm optimistic that safe parking will eventually get recognized as one of the least expensive ways to help to take care of people who are living in their cars."

While safe parking is seen as a relatively inexpensive way to support a specific contingent of the homeless population, it hasn't attracted widespread use.

Some of that could be owed to Gov. Gavin Newsom's decision in 2019 to veto a proposed bill that would have required cities and counties with a population greater than 330,000 to establish safe parking programs.

"We should leave these decisions up to local governments to make right-size decisions to address this crisis," Newsom said in his veto message.

Father Dennis Kriz, a homeless advocate who leads St. Philip Benizi Church in Fullerton, said the city should just designate a parking lot for the homeless to park in.

Kriz's church is part of the Fullerton Tri-Parish Homelessness Collabora-

tion, which advocated for the safe parking program.

"... It doesn't have to cost money," Kriz said. "If we don't have the money for a Grade-A system, why not just a Grade-B, -C or even just 'passing' system."

Residents also continue to be an ongoing obstacle to establishing programs to help the homeless in Orange County.

"Of course residents here are quite upset, and legitimately upset — they don't want to see the RVs and vans parked across the city here," Kriz said.

"But then, well, if they don't really have a place to go, that's a problem. You know, think this thing through ... Some sort of a parking program would improve the quality of life of the city or of the region if they only realized that these people are here if they have no place to park. You don't just park anywhere if you do have a designated place for them to park. That just makes things really so much easier for everyone."

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## HOMELESS

Continued from page R1

"But instead they're catering to maskless crazies arguing that they want their kid to go to the prom, and you got 150 extra deaths on the street due to homelessness."

Late last month, Voice of OC reported that there have been outbreaks in 16 homeless shelters in the county.

Tim Houchen, a homeless advocate who was once homeless, said he thinks the street is safer for the homeless right now, though it may be an unpopular opinion.

Houchen said he was uncomfortable being at shelters surrounded by the sick when he was homeless.

"Now these congregated shelters, nobody wants to go to them," Houchen said. "... If I was back on the



Photo by Christine Cotter

**HOMELESS ADVOCATE** Father Dennis Kriz sits in front of a food pantry at St. Philip Benizi Church in Fullerton.

streets homeless again, I wouldn't want to go to those shelters."

Houchen organizes a Homeless Persons' Memorial Day event annually on Dec. 21, the longest night of the year, to honor the homeless who have died.

The event was held virtually last month.

Houchen was recently elected to the Orange County Continuum of Care board of directors, which develops and implements strategies to address homelessness in the county. He

also founded the nonprofit, Hope 4 Restoration.

Many of the deaths on the coroner's list are due to drug overdoses and traffic injuries. Only five of the deaths are listed as being due to COVID-19. About 90 of the individuals have cause of deaths listed as either pending investigation, natural causes or the cause has been left blank.

Houchen and Kriz said many of the deaths are di-

rectly and indirectly related to the pandemic.

Houchen said that one reason for more homeless deaths could be illnesses caused by bad hygiene because public bathrooms are no longer available due to the pandemic.

"Then you have guys that are going to the bathroom too close to where they sleep, and where others sleep," Houchen said. "And they're not washing proper-

ly between going to the bathroom and when they eat. That definitely has an effect on the homeless as far as their hygiene goes."

Kriz said homeless people are afraid to go to hospitals due to possible exposure to the virus. Now, as hospitals are being overrun by COVID-19 patients, homeless people may be even less inclined to seek

See **Homeless**, page R3


## HOMELESS WHO DIED IN ORANGE COUNTY IN 2020:

- Adrian Cenicerros
- Jeffrey Emerson
- Charles Black
- Eligio Flores
- James Fulghum
- Lafi Burgess
- Jesus Espinosa
- Arthur Romero
- Kenneth Clark
- Rashawn Squire
- Faith Rosales
- Isidro Aparicio
- Michael Potchka
- Morgan Brombal
- Colin Willis
- Donny Van Why
- March Reddick
- Mark Montanez
- Malik Shwiat
- Michael Cernak
- Alberto
- Alcauter-Perez
- Vidal Reyes
- Harold Bell
- Jacob Solomon
- Bill Baldwin
- Julie Sashkin
- Michael Mcnatt
- Jerome Howard
- Douglas Marx
- Paul Burton
- Monteray Ruiz
- Robert Mckinley
- Steven Malinowski
- Ronald Schenk
- Joseph Araujo
- Rueben Kronstedt
- Mafi Taumoefolau
- James Galvin
- Robert Jenkins
- Antoine Villa
- Kenneth Olsen
- John Moore
- Arthur Cuin
- Laura Peery
- Cristobal Navarro
- Munoz
- Joseph Ruelas, jr.
- Hector Carrillo
- Daniel Dreis
- Marcia Eaton
- Richard Lopez
- Michael Davenport
- Tyler Gotch
- Michael Brown
- Michael Armstrong
- Kevin Newberry
- Kathryn Morris
- Fred Rodriguez
- Arturo Hernandez
- Jimenez
- Ric Hale
- Valentin Rodriguez
- Anntanette Brown
- Michael Finnerty
- Andrew Brosnan
- Long Nguyen
- Charles Taylor
- Daylene Bunch
- Diana Maldonado
- Daniel Hoffman
- Michael Tokars
- Stevi Crothers
- David Portney
- Rose Kelley
- Rudy Sanchez
- Jerry Gross
- Mark Swanson
- Thomson Vo
- Michael Nyhus
- Martin House
- Todd Megna
- Mario Porres
- Rick Davis
- Ruben Magdaleno
- George Acevedo
- Miguel Jimenez
- Elizabeth Nealon
- William Trudgeon
- Mario Crumpacker
- Samantha Kilburn
- Tuan Nguyen
- Noe Garcia
- Emily Jones
- Linda Grajeda
- Richard Comfort
- Cheryl Leonard
- William Mcguckie
- Steven Martin
- Samuel Balch
- Gerard Kelly
- Brian Eschbach
- Patrick Lynaugh
- John Younggren
- Edward Janssen
- Alvin Wendlandt
- Robert Hackett
- Kenneth Connel
- Andrew Concepcion
- Matthew Nickolescu
- Paul Malott
- Michael White
- Jose Chacon
- Patrick Prendergast
- Manolis Tsarnas
- Tuong Nguyen
- Alexander Carillo
- Carolyn Tate
- Marie Tate
- John Dilworth
- John Lingua
- Sawyer Pawlik
- Mario Armento
- Michael Gilreath
- Tricia Gonzalez
- Hiep Truong
- Jonathan Lemaster
- Theodore
- Contreras, jr.
- Geoffrey Power
- Veronica Valenzuela
- Randall Wallets
- Barry Jackson
- Christopher Johnsen
- Ronald Woolley
- Robert Figueroa
- Jeffrey Antes
- Abel Roberto
- Bernal Tellez
- Lorraine Herrera
- Jose Salgado
- Timothy Schoch
- John Ream
- Roxanne Rios
- Jeffery Byrd
- Abul Kalam
- Bruce Stovall
- Geraldine Oremus
- Victoria Hodges
- Francisco Torivio
- Penaloza
- Robert Simpson
- Angel Jimenez
- David Stame
- Daniel Lopez
- Jeremy Mathis
- Kevin Gowdy
- Francisco
- Quintanilla
- Joseph Drake
- James Lobnow
- Nibardo Navarro
- Hector Mena
- Ernesto Mota
- George Cristiano
- Obede Ferreira
- William Rye
- Sean Richards
- Felipe Moreno
- Jimenez
- Anthony Matos
- Jose Serrato
- William Powell
- Infant male (Gomez)
- Michael Cocuzzi
- Sky Kincaid
- Ramon Madrid
- Teresa Felker
- Guy Sinclair
- Ralph Finch
- Rafael
- Morenopiceno
- Minh Nguyen
- Esteban
- Azpeitacallejas
- Robert Parsons
- Aimee Vetere
- Christopher Schiller
- Lindsey Lofstrom
- Eddie Fabela
- Robert Harding
- Elizabeth Platipodis
- Colleen Zehfuss
- Marcel Do
- Myra Curry
- Daniel Mcneley
- Cesar De la Rosa
- Garduno
- Milvia Schinaia
- David Lindemuth
- Jorge Cervantes
- Garcia
- Jennifer Finney
- Nathan Woodruff
- Derrick Golightly
- Michael Tutwiler
- David Kim
- Angela Demyers
- Scott Barnes
- Rhonda Hodges
- Shawn Ficquette
- Ryan Villanueva
- John Sisolak
- Gustavo Gasper
- Randall Powell
- Douglas Morentin
- Jeff Jerue
- Chase Christopher
- Melvin Walker
- Chela Long
- Danny Mckrill
- Jay Cox
- Donald Muckleroy
- Austin Moore
- Tymisha Gray
- Paul Gill
- Louis Reed
- Lee Meszaros
- Alexa Cook
- Roberto Cuevas
- Steven Anderson
- Infant male (Goin)
- Vincent Cisneros
- William Routledge
- Brenda Foster
- Miguel Varela
- Andrew Holman
- Manuel Bautista
- Martha Valle
- Ryan Gable
- Donald Tapparo
- Thien Nguyen
- Elstephon Noah
- Ramiro Benitez
- John Aranda
- Jose Anaya
- Melinda Huyette
- James Romey
- Michael Gomez
- Jason Desilva
- Kurt Reinhold
- Kevin Porter
- Charles Slater
- Van Nguyen
- Camilo Enriquez
- Trisha Woodward
- Michael Eisenhauer
- Chad Kizzar
- Tyler Lopez
- Carlos Perez
- Jennifer Habib
- William Bewley III
- Donald Welch
- Merry
- Watanasrimongkol
- Joyce Mcadoo
- Matthew Mckinney
- Ricky Delgado
- Heather Rheuby
- Steven Borboa
- Jose De los Santos
- Steven Wiatt
- Faith Reynolds
- James Vasquez
- Donna Valadez
- Dionicio
- Ramirez-Ortega
- Conrad Rieger
- Jonathan Rawlings
- David Monge
- Anthony Gonzales
- Paula Ford
- Kristofer Miller
- John Nguyen
- Daniel Delgado
- Ronald Whitecotton
- Derek Dougherty
- Daniel Mayhew jr.
- William Castillo
- Ignacio Maldonado
- Christopher Jones
- Damond Miller
- Leonard Romero jr.
- Carissa Ortiz
- Robert Garza
- Luis Hernandez
- Nicholas Melanson
- Roger Brooks
- Infant male (Tostado)
- Bruce Johnstone
- Michael Derushia
- Priscilla Salinas
- Dakota Hansen
- James Keech
- Stacy Mendes
- Jerry Piper
- Larry Kichler
- Esmail Farzanehkari
- Gustavo Constanco
- John Doe #187
- Paul Taylor
- Andrea Berkis
- Miguel Ruacho
- Gerardo Ruiz
- Chavez
- Randy Constant
- Jose Ramirez
- Michael Ortiz
- Matthew Torres
- Antone Kaleel
- Jeffrey Villarreal
- George
- Glendenning
- Juan Sanchez
- Jason Motis
- Charles Molfese
- Robert Johnson jr.
- Daniel Smith
- Adam Givelli
- Ruswuel
- Castellanos
- Felisha Hernandez
- Daniel Reddy
- Karen Mitchell
- Michael
- Muensterman
- Jaima Fawcett
- Robyn Stewart
- Janie Dvries
- Alexandria Fody
- Rou Chung
- Alan Doney
- Ramon Lopez jr
- J. Refugio Muniz
- Robert Geddes
- Veronica Blake
- Michael Matthews

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Dr. Mark Kramer

# Alternative Baseball preps for the launch of its first club in O.C.

BY VERA CASTANEDA

Alternative Baseball Organization, a nonprofit that sets up baseball teams targeted toward teens and adults with autism and other disabilities, is launching its first club in Orange County.

The nonprofit, open to ages 15 and up, is based in the East Coast but found an unexpected need for expansion in the West Coast during the coronavirus pandemic.

Taylor Duncan, 25, founded Alternative Baseball in Dallas, Ga., initially with the goal to raise awareness and acceptance of people diagnosed with autism.

Duncan said he was diagnosed on the autism spectrum at the age of 4 and had anxiety, speech and sensory issues. He didn't have the same opportunities to play traditional sports as his peers.

"As I got older, my mother, teachers and mentors helped me get through a lot of those [developmental] delays," Duncan said. "I was ready to participate [in baseball]. But I still faced a lot of the social stigma and a lot of negative perceptions of what one with autism can and cannot accomplish in the sports world."

Duncan was denied opportunities to play traditional sports multiple times. One Little League coach cited his autism as a safety risk. Other coaches benched Duncan often. He couldn't find sports programming in his area that catered to him. Instead, he recruited players and established his own team to take to a championship game. He went on to attend spring training in Kissimmee, Fla., and traveled to receive one-on-one training from athletes in various locations.

In 2016, he decided to bring all that he learned back to his hometown. While the intention was to create a local awareness campaign through baseball, Duncan found there was a national need for disabilities services. He said the skills he learned through baseball transferred over to other areas of life like employment.

"I'm thinking why can't I bring everything that I learned to others who just want the same experience to really learn how to work together as a team, how to encourage each other even when times are the absolute worst," Duncan said.

Since then, the nonprofit has expanded across the U.S. with about 70 clubs. As of today, there is one coach-



Courtesy of Alternative Baseball Organization

**TAYLOR DUNCAN**, the CEO and commissioner of Alternative Baseball Organization, plays a game in the 2019 Ole Time Classic in Marietta, Ga.

ing manager who volunteered to represent the Orange County club — Kelly Henderson.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Duncan said Alternative Baseball had 20 teams. The more teams launched, the more media attention Duncan received and the more volunteers kept reaching out to fill a niche in their respective neighborhoods.

"If it weren't for our volunteers, who devote their time and their specific roles to help us have the highest quality of program possible, we wouldn't be here," Duncan said.

Henderson watched Duncan's broadcast interview on KTLA last year and reached out. She's worked in special education for about five years and liked that the nonprofit focused on the nurturing portion of baseball as opposed to the competitiveness of the sport.

"I thought this would be a good kind of an outlet for students with communication disabilities to have an opportunity to participate in something that really does support their growth in sportsmanship," Henderson said. "Not just the physical skills, but the social-emotional skills as well. Everybody should have those memories of growing up."

She's based in Seal Beach and hopes to secure a local field once it becomes safe and available to do so. Her

goal over the year is to push for inclusiveness by encouraging more coaches from local high school baseball communities to get involved in the nonprofit.

Henderson, who teaches kids with autism in Huntington Beach, said, "In my teaching lifetime, putting communication disabilities into the mainstream world is so recent. Everything has just changed. Now, we are opening up so many doors and avenues for people with communication disabilities to be part of our communities."

Duncan said people are focused on volunteering during the pandemic.

"People want to be able to plan for life after the pandemic," Duncan said. "I feel like this pandemic made a lot of people realize that it's really important to be able to have that community engagement, to get out there and help those who really need help and fulfill needs that have not been served."

For now, Duncan is taking media, volunteer umpire and coach and potential player informational interviews over Zoom and phone. He estimates it'll take six months to a year to fill new teams and is keeping an eye out for when sports can safely return.

For more information about Alternative Baseball, visit [alternativebaseball.org](http://alternativebaseball.org).

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## HOMELESS

Continued from page R2

help for health issues, and some hospitals may not have room.

Houchen said outreach efforts and other services that were available to the homeless prior to the pandemic have been reduced.

Because opioids, particularly fentanyl, are responsible for many homeless overdoses in Orange County, Houchen believes the lack of available outreach and resources contributed to the high number of deaths.

"A lot of services and a lot of the resources that they had before were just completely wiped out single-handedly by COVID," Houchen said.

"I know that we have a really big problem, nationwide, not just among homeless people, with opioids, particularly fentanyl. And I think a lot of these deaths, probably are resulting from that."

Houchen and Kriz believe more than 330 homeless people passed away last year in the county.

In past years, Houchen added names to the coroner's list of homeless people who died that he independently verified. In 2020, he didn't add any names because he wasn't able to get out on foot to verify other deaths due to the pandemic.

"It's an undercount almost certainly," Kriz said. "But it's the only count we have."

Advocates have been concerned about the rise in homeless deaths since the infant months of the pandemic. Kriz and other activists held car rallies to advocate for the county to do more for the homeless.

The county's current plan includes transitioning from Project Roomkey, which has largely ended, to Project Homekey, another state initiative that entails purchasing and rehabilitating hotels, motels, vacant apartments and other buildings to house the homeless.

The county has purchased a Stanton hotel and motel so far. The former Stanton Inn & Suites began operating as interim housing in late November. The second site, the former Tahiti Motel, is currently being rehabilitated and is expected to begin operating as an interim site in mid-February.

Jason Austin, director of the county's Office of Care Coordination, said homeless individuals in the Project Roomkey program were transferred to next step housing options through the county's Project Toolbelt Program, which includes rooms for rent, board and care homes, sober living homes, room and boards, permanent housing, shelters and motels.

The current operations of Project Roomkey are limited to providing isolation to homeless people who are positive or symptomatic for COVID-19, Austin said.

Homeless advocates like Kriz and Houchen will continue to advocate for the most vulnerable as the darkest months of the pandemic continue into the new year.

Houchen said one of the issues he plans to take on in 2021 is the lack of information the coroner's office provides when a homeless person dies. He said he's followed up on homeless cases that were pending for more than a year and there are still no updates.

"The truth is, we don't get the data that we really need from our coroner so that we can make important determinations, so we can make adjustments to how we provide services and resources to the homeless community," Houchen said.

A list is included on page R2 of the names of homeless people who passed away in Orange County in 2020, according to information provided by the coroner's office. The list includes four stillborn babies and one unidentified man.

According to homeless advocates, the list likely doesn't include all the homeless who died last year in Orange County.

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Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

**THIS PHARMACY** is in an affluent area in Orange County. UC Irvine researchers recently published a study that shows low-income areas can have limited access to pharmacies.

## UC Irvine researchers first to study 'pharmacy deserts' in California

BY BEN BRAZIL

UC Irvine researchers recently published the first study analyzing the presence of "pharmacy deserts" in California.

Pharmacy deserts are communities that have limited access to pharmacies. Black, Latino and low-income communities have historically lacked close access to pharmacies, according to information provided by researchers.

These same communities have also been hit hardest by the COVID-19 virus, with Santa Ana's and Anaheim's Latino residents experiencing the brunt of Orange County's cases.

While the idea of pharmacy deserts is not new, Cheryl Wisseh, the study's first author, said researchers haven't typically looked at the social factors that play a role in the phenomenon, like access to a car, crime rates and poverty.

Wisseh, a health sciences assistant clinical professor at UC Irvine, and her colleagues were the first to link disparities and pharmacy deserts in California.

The researchers specifically focused on communities in Los Angeles County where the closest pharmacy was at least a mile away.

They found that areas with less access to pharmacies generally have denser populations, greater numbers of Latino and Black residents, less vehicle and home ownership and higher crime rates and poverty.

"Having those social determinants of health, these can compound the negative effects of having a pharmacy shortage," Wisseh said.

UC Irvine partnered with researchers from the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles for the study.

It's all the more urgent that people have access to pharmacies for health screenings, vaccines and medications during the current pandemic.

"With people living in these deserts ... it's thinking about having to use the bus to go get your medications and, you know, planning your life around that," Wisseh said.

"Especially if you're somebody who has a chronic condition and you're taking several medications, it becomes a bit of a challenge and it influences the quality of life."

Wisseh said the ability to order medications in the mail has possibly helped ameliorate the issue, but many people lack internet access to order medications.

She pointed out that it would be helpful if policymakers worked to ensure that population health is a key component in determining market entry plans for pharmacies and approving policies to increase access to medications.

Wisseh said further research is needed to fix the pharmacy disparities.

She plans to conduct a larger-scale study to analyze whether pharmacy deserts contribute to minority community members taking their prescriptions as prescribed and to investigate disparities with the availability of medications within pharmacies.

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# AFTER UNPRECEDENTED DEAL, KEY O.C. INFORMANT AGAIN FACES LIFE IN PRISON

BY MEGHANN M. CUNIFF

In December 2017, federal prosecutors visited Orange County Superior Court to support something even more unusual than their cross-jurisdictional courtroom presence: an exceptionally light sentence for an attempted murder defendant who once testified he'd killed "up to five, maybe six" people.

Oscar Daniel Moriel faced life in prison under California's three-strikes law when he was charged in 2005, but he spent more than a decade helping federal and state authorities as a jail informant in exchange for unprecedented leniency. Praised by federal and O.C. law enforcement officials as "instrumental" in securing convictions for major crimes, Moriel's deal was described as fair justice for a man whose work against the Mexican Mafia mitigated his crimes and lessened his threat to public safety.

But three years later, 40-year-

old Moriel is again facing life behind bars, accused of illegally packing a gun and ammunition as a convicted felon out of custody for the first time in 15 years.

It's unclear, however, how his case will be affected by his decadelong role in a criminal justice scandal that's the subject of an ongoing federal civil rights investigation, as the state attorney general's office is prosecuting him instead of the Orange County district attorney's office. And according to his lawyer, they're hardly going easy on him: Brendon Marshall, the San Diego-based deputy attorney general who's assigned the case insists it's a life-in-prison case under the state's three-strikes law, the same cataclysmic consequence Moriel spent so many years in jail trying to avoid.

"I don't think three strikes apply; he will say it does," Moriel's court-appointed attorney, Christian Jensen, said in a brief phone interview.

Still, the district attorney's office

isn't completely out of the loop: two O.C. prosecutors have filled in for Marshall on three occasions, and they handed a separate parole violation case against Moriel that resolved in October with a 180-day jail sentence that included credit for time served.

Moriel's new trouble is another indictment of Orange County's decades-long use of informants, which dismantled several major criminal cases and brought federal civil rights investigators from the Department of Justice's D.C. office to Orange County for a still-ongoing investigation. Despite high praise from law enforcement that helped ensure he'd see freedom again, Moriel had been out of prison less than three months when he was arrested on a parole violation in August, then charged with the new crimes. State prosecutors say they have the case because it came from their own law enforcement division.

"This was never a case handled by the Orange County district at-

torney. We are handling prosecution because the California Department of Justice's Division of Law Enforcement was the law enforcement agency involved," according to an email from the attorney general's press office. "We often handle cases that originate from our Department of Law Enforcement's Bureau of Firearms. We filed approximately 74 cases in the last fiscal year."

Moriel left jail Nov. 9 after posting \$200,000 bail through a bond company.

Scott Sanders, the assistant public defender who uncovered Moriel's informant work, wondered why Moriel's bail wasn't higher than \$200,000, because Orange County's bail standards call for at least \$1 million in cases with potential life sentences. But the standards state two prior strikes warrant \$200,000, which is what O.C. Superior Court Commissioner Vickie Hix cited when she set the amount at Moriel's Aug. 27 arraignment, according to a tran-

script of the proceedings. But Sanders said Moriel's strikes include a so-called super strike that makes him eligible for a life sentence.

"It's the responsibility of the prosecutorial agency to tell a judge who's making the bail determination that the defendant found with a gun not only tried to kill someone in his last case but admitted to shooting and killing five or six other people," Sanders said. "He's not owed anything else at this point. He shouldn't get one more benefit."

Sanders first questioned Moriel in 2014 during his defense of Scott Dekraai in the Seal Beach mass murder, eliciting testimony about Moriel's uncharged crimes and propensity for gunplay that included several drive-by shootings with unknown results.

Moriel isn't the informant who talked to Dekraai in jail, but Sanders pointed to his work and prose-

See **Informant**, page R5

## CHICKEN

Continued from page R1

down with mayo. They use vinegar instead. The result is a sandwich whose crunch is as big as its cross section.

Even rarer still is Cluck's offering of hush puppies. Called "street corn fritters," these craggle-crust balls of cornbread fluffiness should be at the top of the pecking order over any other choice of side.

### SPICE-C

2455 Park Ave, Tustin. Opened July 2020. Cost of one slider: \$5.50.

This mom-n-pop likely pictured a different year than the one that happened.

But even without the foot traffic they were hoping for from the AMC theater next door, Spice-C does brisk business during lunchtime. It's a no-frills hot chicken shop with a short menu that presumes you know what you're getting into.

Like others, they require you to sign a release before



**SPICE-C**, at 2455 Park Ave., Tustin, has its own Nashville hot chicken sandwich.

trying the "Reaper" level of spice. But as a bulwark against lightweights who can't handle even the "medium," they also have a note next to the register that warns: "All sales final! No refunds! No exchanges! It is spicy!" The "mild" is sufficiently hot, but there's also the option of adding cheese for a nominal fee if adding cheese to fried chicken is something you're into. No release is required for doing so, but still, no refunds.

### POULTRYGRAM

180 S Brea Blvd, Brea. Opened July 2020. Cost of one Nashville Hot Chicken Sandwich: \$9.

For Geno Fontanoza, executive chef at Brea Improv, the March stay-at-home order was no laughing matter. What were they going to do with the kitchen when there were no comedy audiences to serve?

The answer? Jump onto two of the hottest food trends: Nashville hot chicken sandwiches and online delivery. And that's how the Poultrygram ghost kitchen was born.

The idea of utilizing the comedy club's kitchen during down times was incubated before the crisis, but the concept has now proven so viable that the Irvine, San Jose and Hollywood Improvs have followed suit with their own Poultrygrams serving all the delivery apps. If you decide to pick up your food from the Brea location, you must first find the unmarked side door (hint: it's in the alleyway between two buildings,



**POULTRYGRAM'S** Nashville Hot Chicken Sandwich. The shop opened at 180 S. Brea Blvd. in Brea in July 2020.

behind the valet tent). And when you pay, it will feel like an illicit drug deal, which is apropos because the sandwiches are addictive.

It's also the most decadent and messiest on this list, with dripping coleslaw, an effortlessly crunchy chicken breast doused in glaze and the unexpected presence of sweet relish that lands like a well-delivered punchline. Poultry-



Photos by Edwin Goei

**JAY BIRD'S** Chicken, 303 3rd St., Ste 101, Huntington Beach.

gram offers only two spicing levels, but be warned: the one called "Hot A.F." is no joke.

### JAY BIRD'S CHICKEN

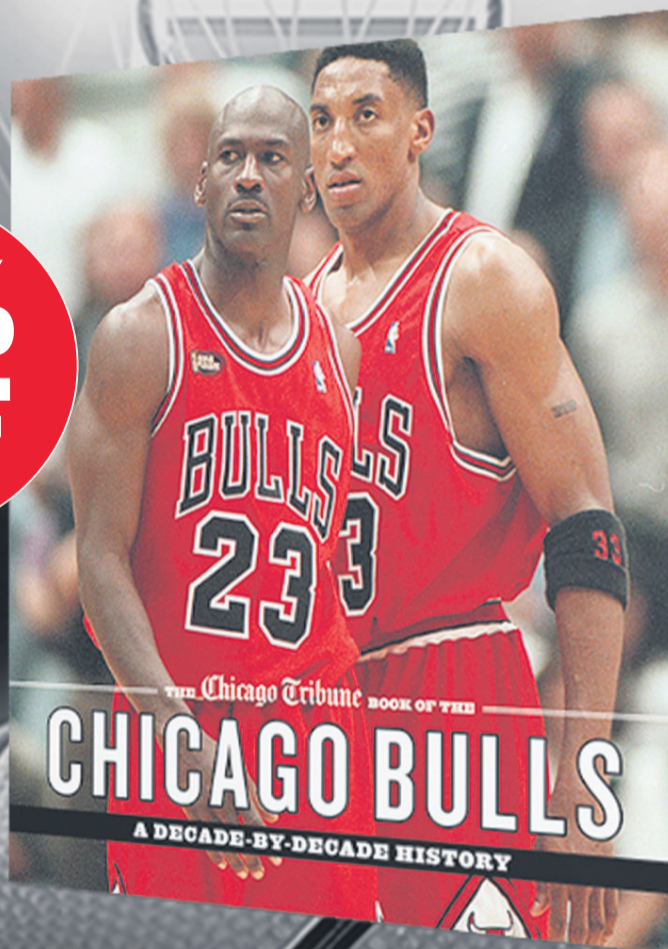
303 3rd St, Ste 101, Huntington Beach. Opened August 2020. Cost of one Baby Jay's (a hot chicken sandwich sans coleslaw): \$7.99.

Like other Nashville hot chicken joints, Jay Bird's has a logo featuring a cartoon

chicken, but it's nothing compared to the giant caricature of the chef himself. He sports a big gap-toothed grin and a mohawk resembling a rooster's comb. It is an uncanny likeness of the real Jay Bogsinske, the former chef at St. Marc who is the inspiration behind the concept that first hatched in Long

See **Chicken**, page R5

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# CHICKEN

Continued from page R4

Beach. This year, with the help of Wild Thyme Restaurant Group, his corporate parent company, Bogsinske expanded Jay Bird's Chicken to O.C. with a store in Huntington Beach. The third shop is planned for Sherman Oaks in 2021.

Common to all his restaurants are craft beers on tap and a hot chicken sandwich boasting a thick but almost tempura-battered breast that can be topped with the house mac-n-cheese, which is notably good if you get it as a side. His eggy, bacon-flecked potato salad, however, is even better. And if you're tired of brioche buns, Jay Bird's also makes waffles, which somehow seems a very quaint accompaniment to fried chicken these days.

## KICKIN' HOT CHICKEN

5777 E La Palma Ave, Anaheim. *Opened September 2020.* Cost of one Nashville Hot Chicken Sando: \$9.95.

At Canyon Village Plaza in Anaheim Hills, over half the storefronts stand empty, including what used to be Smart Choice, the plaza's main supermarket anchor. But in this desolate parking lot there's a sign of life. In fact, it's a banner. It flaps in the breeze proclaiming that Kickin' Hot Chicken is "Now Open" and serving "Nash-



**THE NASHVILLE** Hot Chicken sando at Kickin' Hot Chicken in Anaheim.



**THE GOLDEN** Hot Fried Chicken slider.

ville Hot Chicken Sandwiches."

Formerly a teriyaki bowl joint, this mom-n-pop changed concepts in August to become a franchisee of Legend Hot Chicken. But after about a month, it became an independent. In doing so, it lowered the prices and ditched the plain chicken logo for one with a dabbling rooster. Twenty-five-minute waits for its food are now routine. And though theirs is a basic hot chicken sandwich, it's good, crunchy and generous, with two hulking pieces of breast that the bun can barely contain. Also, since the "mild" is truly mild, each order includes a side of two pickled hot chili peppers as insurance for any disappointed masochists.

## THE GOLDEN HOT FRIED CHICKEN

201 E 4th St, Santa Ana.

*Opened November 2020.* Cost of one slider: \$7.

Before he settled into his nest at Santa Ana's 4th Street Market, the Golden Hot Fried Chicken's Oscar Gonzalez was a free-range chef. He peddled his Nashville hot chicken sliders at farmers markets all over San Bernardino County. But even back then, he didn't stop at sliders. He had a riff on a hot chicken taco that involved a hot chicken strip, coleslaw, two kinds of sauce, pickles and a lacy disk of mozzarella he crisps on a griddle.

His current menu still has that taco along with breakfast sandwiches and breakfast burritos, but it's that taco you want over his sliders. Though only a few cents cheaper than the tacos, the sliders are half the size and do not travel well. If you want a second opinion, ask the cashier



Photos by Edwin Goei

**DAVE'S HOT CHICKEN** is located at 10832 Warner Ave. in Fountain Valley.

which one he prefers and he'll tell you the same. Cradled in the tortilla hammock, the taco takes the excess of sauce that dampens the sliders and gives it a new role as salsa.

## DAVE'S HOT CHICKEN

10832 Warner Ave, Fountain Valley. *Opened December 2020.* Cost of one slider: \$5.45.

In the span of three years, Dave's Hot Chicken grew from a parking lot pop-up by a French Laundry alum into a franchising hot commodity with backing from a Wetzel Pretzel co-founder

and investors that include Maria Shriver and Samuel L. Jackson (who's evidently moved on from Royales with Cheese).

Its first Orange County location is owned and operated by Kei Concepts, the oh-so-hip restaurant group behind the Vox Kitchen and Sup Noodle Bar. The menu has the brevity of In-N-Out, centering around chicken strips dipped in a ruddy sauce with escalating levels of heat, good fries and sliders that would qualify as full-on sandwiches elsewhere.

The amount of chicken in

one slider is equivalent to an entire KFC bone-in breast, with each torpedo-shaped filet extending outside the boundaries of the bun. The resulting aspect ratio is less of a sandwich than a geoduck clam. But you want every inch of this strip. The spicing is complex. The crust is crunchy after 20 minutes of travel time. And the meat is so thick and juicy, if you wring it like a towel, it would drip an espresso cup's worth of chicken soup.

**EDWIN GOEI** is an Orange County food critic.

# INFORMANT

Continued from page R4

cutors' repeated failure to properly disclose it as evidence of a pattern of misconduct involving informants in Orange County.

Judge Thomas Goethals, now a 4th District Court of Appeal justice, eventually dismissed the death penalty because of the misconduct and sentenced Dekraai to life in prison. Moriel's newly publicized informant work had ripple effects beyond the Seal Beach murders too: A murder defendant he questioned was released on a probation deal in 2014, and another had his conviction vacated.

Simply put, the central problem was Moriel had questioned them after they'd been charged with crimes and didn't have their attorneys with them. Given his status as a trained informant, Moriel was legally considered an agent of the government and thus couldn't legally question anyone who was charged with a crime and represented by an attorney.

Further, defense attorneys facing Moriel as a prosecution witness had a right to know information about him that could help their clients, such as a 2009 interview between Moriel and Santa Ana police detectives in which he speaks of grabbing "spots of my memory and [making] it seem like it was yesterday," according to a transcript.

Sanders said the statement should have disqualified Moriel as a prosecution witness.

"He didn't get a break because he gave credible testimony and reliable testimony. He gave it because



Oscar Daniel Moriel

they made a deal with the devil and they decided to keep that deal," Sanders said. "He went to them and said 'I'm a liar; I'm willing to lie for you,' and they said, 'Sounds good.'"

Assistant Dist. Atty. James Laird defended Moriel after Orange County Superior Court Judge Patrick Donahue sentenced him in 2017, telling journalists the informant shouldn't be blamed for law enforcement misconduct.

"He didn't know about constitutional law. Other police departments and other police agencies should have known about it at the time, but it's never been his fault for what other agencies did," Laird said.

Lawrence Rosenthal, a Chapman University law professor who follows the informant scandal, said Moriel should have had a better support system upon release, given his years of incarceration and close relationship with law enforcement.

"The fact that this individual had problems is entirely predictable. The inability of the relevant officials to foresee this entire predictable problem and do what they could to forestall it is very discouraging,"

Rosenthal said.

Moriel had already served three prison stints for threatening a witness, vehicle theft and attempted armed carjacking when he was sentenced in 2017 for second-degree attempted murder, so under the three-strikes law he faced life in prison. But Donahue instead sentenced him to 17 years at Laird's request and with the support of assistant U.S. attorneys Robert J. Keenan and Joseph T. McNally.

The prosecutors praised Moriel's informant work, calling him "instrumental" in investigating Mexican Mafia power wars in the O.C. jail and testifying against a top Mexican Mafia leader. McNally said no one disputes Moriel "has committed very serious crimes ... But I do think that the court needs to take into account what he did with respect to the federal criminal investigation."

Laird also told the judge that while Moriel testified in 2013 he'd killed "up to five, maybe six" people, the Santa Ana Police Department had not located any victims of those purported murders.

Though sentenced to 17 years, Moriel was credited for time served in jail and for good behavior, so he completed his sentence and was released May 24, 2020, to be supervised by a parole officer for three years, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. That parole officer filed a violation report Aug. 12 that led to the new case.

**MEGHANN M. CUNIFF** is a contributor to Times OC. She's on Twitter @meghanncuniff

# TREE

Continued from page R1

for people in Orange County," said Scott LaFleur, executive director of Sherman Library & Gardens.

"The Wishing Tree is something that's been around for generations and a part of many cultures. It's a neat way for people to put their thoughts, hopes and desires on a piece of paper to get it off their chest or out of their hearts for the whole world to see."

The Wishing Tree will be available to visitors through Lunar New Year celebrations or until Feb. 26.

LaFleur said although less people attended their Nights of 1,000 Lights event than previous years, the tree is still full of wishes.

He added the Sherman Library & Gardens felt the burden and cuts of most nonprofits during the pandemic, especially since most of its income came from wedding events, rentals and the on-site restaurant (which has opened and closed multiple times throughout last year.)

But LaFleur also maintains that the garden has a



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

**COLORFUL MESSAGES** adorn the Sherman Library & Gardens wishing tree, available to visitors until Feb. 26.

sustainable future.

The most recent hire includes the gardens' first education director, Catherine Dickinson, and they are looking to hire a program educator to start offering additional classes open to children as well as anyone who would like to learn about Pacific Southwest history, horticulture and arts.

Classes, in-person and limited in size, are currently available focusing on floral design and gardening.

The garden has remained open for admission follow-

ing strict COVID-19 protocols such as wearing face masks, maintaining social distance and requiring hand sanitizing upon entry. "If people need a place to get some mental well being or take a break from the news and everything else that's going on, we welcome them to come and feel safe," LaFleur said.

"We look forward to supporting them throughout the year until we get everything back to normal."

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