

# TimesOC

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## ADVOCATES FIGHT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN ORANGE COUNTY

**MICAIAS PACHECO**, left, and Israel Maldonado both took part in an indoor air pollution measurement project at the factory they work in.

Scott Smeltzer  
Staff  
Photographer



AS CLIMATE CHANGE THREATENS TO WORSEN ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH DISPARITIES IN COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT ORANGE COUNTY, THE LOW-INCOME AND LATINO NEIGHBORHOODS OF SANTA ANA ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE.

### For unionizing factory workers in Santa Ana, indoor air pollution is more pressing than pay

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

On a normal day, Kingspan Light and Air, a factory in Santa Ana's industrial corridor, buzzes with workers welding, spray painting and manufacturing fiberglass to make energy efficient skylights for the Ireland-based corporation. An early morning shift in late August, though, promised to be anything but routine for Israel Maldonado and Micaias Pacheco.

That day, Maldonado, a lead as-

sembly line worker, and Pacheco, a welder, became clandestine "citizen scientists," outfitted with monitors to measure indoor air pollution for an independent study led by Dr. Shahir Masri, a UC Irvine scientist.

Long concerned about the air they breathed while working, Maldonado, Pacheco and six co-workers wore mobile AtmoTube Pro devices as they planted stationary monitors in potential hot

See **Workers**, page R8

**BELOW:** Dr. Shahir Masri, an air pollution scientist with UC Irvine, stands with a few of his devices that monitor air quality.

Don Leach | Staff Photographer



**PATRICIA FLORES**, who leads the nonprofit Orange County Environmental Justice, stands next to a lot with possible lead contamination that will be transformed into a community garden in Santa Ana.

Don Leach  
Staff Photographer

### What will Santa Ana do to keep low-income and Latino residents safe from toxic lead?

BY BEN BRAZIL

Patricia Flores grew up gardening with her dad in their Santa Ana home.

She didn't know then that she was being exposed to potentially toxic levels of lead that lie in the soils of low-income and predominantly Latino neighborhoods in Santa Ana.

Flores, who now leads the Orange County Environmental Justice nonprofit, said there's no doubt that the lead has affected her and her siblings' health.

"It's a generational issue that's been affecting us for decades at this point," Flores said. "It's an issue that is particularly affecting poor com-

munities of color, and so we see that as a form of environmental racism ... There's been no initiative to do something about it on the part of the city, the county or the state. So it's time that something be done to address this issue that's been affecting our health for generations."

Flores' nonprofit partnered with UC Irvine researchers and other community members to study the lead levels in Santa Ana soils. After analyzing more than 1,500 soil samples over several years, the coalition determined in 2020 that the samples ranged from 11.4 to 2,687 parts per million, with an average soil

See **Lead**, page R6



### UCI center will dig into environmental justice issues in O.C. neighborhoods

BY BEN BRAZIL

As climate change threatens to worsen environmental health disparities in vulnerable communities, UC Irvine has started a center dedicated to researching and advancing environmental justice issues.

Public health professors Jun Wu and Alana LeBrón will lead the center. Both have worked with vulnerable communities in Orange

County in recent years to test air quality and lead in neighborhood soils. They plan to incorporate that community focus into the center by seeking out local partnerships and forming a community advisory board to help direct efforts. The center will also host seminars and events.

As it works to solve complex environmental justice issues, the center will be interdisciplinary, engaging

with engineering, urban planning, medicine, nursing, pharmacy and anthropology departments.

"Residents have been raising concerns for years about lead in the soil, about exposure to industrial emissions, about the differential impacts of climate change on the more inland, population-dense communities in Orange

See **Center**, page R6

**RIGHT: PUBLIC HEALTH** professors Jun Wu, left, and Alana LeBrón, UC Irvine Center for Environmental Health Disparities Research co-directors, pose for a portrait.

Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer





# New book details how two O.C. families and a farm helped integrate public schools

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

A Japanese American family's modest farm in Westminster once harvested much more than just asparagus, strawberries and tomatoes. Its fields were also woven into the story of Mendez, et al v. Westminster, one of Orange County's most famous civil rights cases.

Janice Munemitsu, whose father owned the farm, recounts the tale in her newly published book, "The Kindness of Color: The Story of Two Families and Mendez, et al v. Westminster, the 1947 Desegregation of California Public Schools."

It's a history she didn't fully know at first.

Munemitsu was aware that the 40-acre farm was leased when her family was forced into World War II-era internment camps, which she argues in the book are better understood as "incarceration camps," since they operated outside the bounds of legal protections for prisoners of war.

The lease of the property "enabled my family to keep it after my grandfather, grandmother, dad and aunts came back," she said. "But I didn't know the Mendez name."

As Munemitsu recounts in her book, answering a cold call in 2002 made the connection. Sandra Robbie, who was working on a PBS documentary about the case at the time, asked prodding questions to make sure she found the right family member.

Once confirmed, the filmmaker explained how Gonzalo Mendez, a cantina owner from Santa Ana, signed a formal lease agreement and moved his family to the farm. When the new school year started in 1944, his Mexican-Puerto Rican children weren't allowed to enroll in a white school in Westminster and had to attend a Mexican one.

Gonzalo decided to take the Westminster School District of Orange County to court over the segregating snub.

The case became a class-action suit when Thomas Estrada, William Guzman, Frank Palomino and Lorenzo Ramirez joined as co-plaintiffs against school segregation in Santa Ana,



Photos by Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

**JANICE MUNEMITSU**, author of "The Kindness of Color," stands in front of Johnson Middle School in Westminster. Munemitsu is holding a shovel from the family farm that used to sit on the site of the school.

Garden Grove, and Orange as well.

Mendez used the profits from the farm's harvests to help cover legal fees associated with the case. An appellate court upheld a ruling in favor of the families in 1947.

Munemitsu soon met with Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez's three children, Sylvia, Gonzalo Jr. and Jerome, after learning of their shared history. She appeared in Robbie's "Mendez vs. Westminster: For All the Children / Para Todos los Niños," and later joined Sylvia Mendez as a public ambassador of the case's history.

During one such presentation in 2019, Munemitsu and Mendez noticed a particularly receptive audience at the New Jersey headquarters of Prudential Insurance.

"We were just struck by how many people loved the story of the families' connection," she said. "We also spoke at the Orange County Department of Education and again we got a simi-



lar reaction."

Dr. Jeff Hittenberger, then serving as chief academic officer for the department of education, noticed the response as well and encouraged Munemitsu to write a book.

"Every person in Orange County, and certainly every student, should know this story," said Hittenberger, now a Vanguard University professor. "In a time of division and incivility, Munemitsu shows how people of all backgrounds can work together, act with kindness and

courage, and help our nation live up to its commitments to equality, justice, and democracy."

Despite some initial hesitation, Munemitsu began jotting her family's stories down and interviewed Sylvia Mendez to fine-tune the history. Writing through the pandemic, the effort resulted in a makeshift manuscript that she honed and self-published last month.

"The Kindness of Color" weaves through the two families' immigrant stories and the dis-

crimination they faced. Because of the California Alien Land Law of 1913, Munemitsu's grandfather, a noncitizen, couldn't own the Westminster farm. A family friend who was a U.S. citizen stepped in and became the legal guardian of Seiko "Tad" Munemitsu, his young son, who was then allowed to own it.

Kindness often served as a catalyst against such injustices. Munemitsu dedicated a chapter to Frank Monroe, a banker who connected the Mendez and Munemitsu families together through the lease.

"If Monroe hadn't gone that extra step to get to know Gonzalo on a more personal level, he would've never have known that he always wanted to be a farmer," Munemitsu said. "If Monroe hadn't taken the time to mentor my father as a young boy in business so that my grandfather could understand what needed to happen, this history wouldn't have happened."

Such meditations on kindness serve as a through line, even as the chapters offer a harrowing personal history of her family's time away at an incarceration camp in Poston, Ariz.

The story of Japanese Americans and their incarceration in internment camps as well as Mexican Americans and school segregation, "The Kindness of Color" fills an important void. Even though Mendez, et al v. Westminster is part of the state's curriculum, educational resources about the case are scant.

Munemitsu's book arrives ahead of the 75th anniversary of the appellate court's ruling next year as the planned Mendez Freedom Trail in Westminster remains under construction. She hopes her work finds its way to young people, especially, as a reminder that simple acts of kindness can forward the cause of justice.

"As I've talked to people, they're looking for a story that gives them reasons to hope," Munemitsu said. "Whatever you can do has a ripple effect."

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Courtesy of the Orange County Department of Education

**STATE SEN.** Umberg presents a check to help complete the Mendez Freedom Trail project.

## Mendez Freedom Trail in Westminster secures \$1.5-million state funding boost

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

A planned freedom trail honoring the landmark Mendez, et al v. Westminster civil rights trial took an important step closer to completion. Westminster City Council members celebrated the presentation of a \$1.5-million check in state funding during a brief ceremony held this week at the future site of the Mendez Tribute Monument Park.

In 1945, Gonzalo Mendez served as lead plaintiff in the case after his Latino children were disallowed from attending 17th Street School in Westminster and told to enroll at Hoover Elementary, a Mexican school, instead.

The ruling in favor of the families helped paved the way for the better known 1954 Brown v. Board of Edu-

cation U.S. Supreme Court decision that held segregated schools were "inherently unequal" and unconstitutional.

State Sen. Tom Umberg (SD-34) secured the funding to complete the Mendez Freedom Trail project and was on hand for the check presentation.

"I'm incredibly proud to support a project in my district as significant and important to California and the country," Umberg said in a news statement. "This funding will help generations of people for years to come learn about this important part of history."

The Mendez Tribute Monument Park is expected to be completed early next year. It will feature statues of Gonzalo Mendez and his wife, Felicitas Mendez, sculpted by Ignacio Gomez.

Another statue of schoolchildren holding books will symbolize the 5,000 youth represented by the class-action suit.

Along Hoover Street, the Mendez Freedom Trail near the park will feature four historical interactive installations on the case along a 2-mile path and is expected to open later next year.

Westminster City Councilman Sergio Contreras first spearheaded the monument efforts in 2017 and welcomed state funding.

"The Mendez Tribute Monument Park and Freedom Trail serves as a reminder," he said, "that we must fight inequality in our pursuit of liberty and justice for all."

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# Santa Ana's Beyond Blindness helps the vision impaired go above and beyond

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

Eleven-year-old Mason Lopes likes things most kids his age like: milkshakes, basketball and Lady Gaga.

"You know what my favorite song is?" he asks with a contagious giggle. "Born This Way!"

Mason was born with some challenges that affect his life. Mason has cerebral palsy, and before his first year his mother, Charissa Lopes, said they realized his vision was impaired.

"We found out he was blind when he was 5 month old," Lopes said. "I mean, it is scary to find out that your kid is going to be blind and you don't know what the future is going to hold for them."

However, through the help of Santa Ana-based Beyond Blindness, Mason's optic nerve hypoplasia has not stopped him from accomplishing major milestones.

"We came here, and immediately we felt like we were at home and so supported," Lopes said. "They made us feel so welcome and that everything was going to be OK."

Mason's first steps and first words resulted from the support provided by the team at Beyond Blindness.

"We rely so much on our sight as adults, and when you think of kids who are developing ... your ABCs and your 123s, kids learn all of that from looking at books and pictures," Lopes said. "We were able to come to Beyond Blindness and have people who specialize in children who can't see and to give them those tactile cues, to motivate them."

Beyond Blindness is a nonprofit dedicated to empowering children with visual impairments and other disabilities to achieve their fullest potential. Services offered include early intervention, education and enrichment as well as family support.

The Lopes family found their way to Beyond Blindness when the director at the time invited them to the organization's annual Destination Independence 5k Walk. Lopes and her husband attended the walk with their extended family and instantly felt a sense of relief.

"Just to see the kids running around and playing, and yes, they are blind and yes, they have disabilities, but they are just typical kids doing normal things and having fun," Lopes said. "It was the beacon of light in this very dark moment."

Lopes said she realized that Beyond Blindness might be able to provide the missing piece from the care they received from optometrists and doctors.

"To be honest, having a child who is blind is so low incident that pediatricians and doctors are not skilled to work with kids specifically like that," Lopes said. "And you come into Beyond Blindness and immediately you see the entire place is set up to work with kids who are blind and visually impaired, and you can't find that anywhere."

Beyond Blindness formerly operated as the Blind Children's Learning Center, but recently unveiled their new name and branding, which more accurately represents the organization's evolution.

"For nearly 60 years, Blind Children's Learning Center has prepared children with visual impairments for a life of independence," said Angie Rowe, president and executive director at Beyond Blindness. "Our new name signifies our evolution and expansion to serve and positively impact a wider population of children with visual impairments and other disabilities and their families."

Originally founded in 1962, Beyond Blindness continues to grow. The organization served more than 300 Orange County children and their families last year alone.

But as Rowe mentioned, the needs of the families they serve has changed and the group is committed to meeting that change.

"Over the last five to 10 years, the conditions that caused single visibility blindness and visual impairment, like retinopathy of prematurity and some of the other diseases, they have developed gene therapies and other interventions to intervene at a younger age, restoring vision," Rowe said. "We have now evolved into an agency that is serving kids who have visual impairments but also other disabilities."



Photos by Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

**MASON LOPES, 11**, of Santa Ana uses a Moutbatten Braille with his left hand as his mother Charissa looks on at Beyond Blindness in North Tustin. Lopes has cerebral palsy that affects the right side of his body.

Rowe points out that when 80% of early learning is from vision, a child that has other disabilities, like autism or cerebral palsy, needs a teacher who can take a holistic approach.

"I think Mason is a prime example of a child that came to us with multiple disabilities," Rowe said.

For almost all of Mason's life, Beyond Blindness teachers and specialists have given him Braille instruction, occupational therapy, speech therapy and more. Their orientation and mobility specialist also taught him how to become more familiar with his environment and surroundings, helping him to stay safe while still having the freedom to play and explore.

"Now Mason is a super engaging kid," Rowe said.

Mason has aged out of the on-site classrooms, but he and his family are still involved in education and enrichment and family support programs. The skills he continues to gain help him live a



**MASON USES HIS** left hand to press down buttons on a Moutbatten Braille, an electronic machine used to type Braille on Braille paper.

life that allows him to enjoy sailing, horseback riding and playing the piano. Mason is able to play many songs after hearing them just one time, tapping out "Happy Birthday" and even "Shallow." (He is a Gaga fan, after all.)

Currently, Mason is in a home-schooling program that still provides teachers of students with visual impairments and orientation and mobility instruction.

Besides being a helpful resource for the vision impaired

and their families, Beyond Blindness provides another important service often overlooked by connecting the vision impaired with other young people with the same challenges.

"We are here to help on the journey and help with building connections," Rowe said.

October is Blindness Awareness Month, with awareness being raised through education and ad-

See **Beyond**, page R8



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**LEAD**

*Continued from page R1*

sample of 123.1 ppm. In analyzing how lead disproportionately affects lower-income communities, the researchers found that there was an inverse correlation between income levels and the presence of lead in the community. Soil samples collected in neighborhoods with median household incomes below \$50,000 had 440% higher lead levels than communities with a median household income of \$100,000, and 70% higher lead concentrations when compared to neighborhoods with median household incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

That study came after former ThinkProgress investigative reporter Yvette Cabrera published a detailed investigation of the lead crisis in Santa Ana in 2017. For the investigative series, Cabrera found hazardous lead levels after testing more than 1,000 soil samples from homes and other public areas around Santa Ana.

The California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment considers anything above 80 ppm in a residential area as hazardous to health. About half of the soil samples exceeded the California safety recommendation. The findings were particularly glaring for children, with researchers finding that neighborhoods housing more than 28,000 children had maximum lead concentrations exceeding 80 ppm, and 12,000 of those children were in neighborhoods with lead concentrations above 400 ppm, the Environmental Protection Agency's recommendation for play areas.

Children exposed to lead can develop a number of neurological issues, including smaller brain volume, lower working memory and processing speed, more limited perceptual reasoning, poor school performance and asthma. Adults exposed to high levels of lead can suffer cardiovascular issues, renal problems, osteoporosis and cognitive deficiencies.



Raul Roa | Staff Photographer

**ORANGE COUNTY** Environmental Justice community outreach workers go over logistics while in their office in Santa Ana in August 2019. From left, Marilyn Garcia, Javier Garay, Alejandra Hernandez and Yaretzy Hernandez.



Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

**PUBLIC HEALTH** professors Jun Wu, left, and Alana LeBron, UC Irvine Center for Environmental Health Disparities Research co-directors, hold up bags of soil collected from a community in Santa Ana where lead was found.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there is no safe level of lead in the blood of children.

"Even low levels of lead in blood have been shown to affect IQ, ability to pay attention and academic achievement," says the CDC website.

Hoping to put an end to a longstanding problem for the vulnerable communities of Santa Ana, Flores has been using the findings to press the city and county for a solution. As the city

has been updating its general plan over the last year, Flores said the nonprofit saw it as an opportunity to push for soil lead remediation policies to be added to the plan.

Starting in September 2020, the nonprofit has had a series of round table discussions with UC Irvine researchers, the city of Santa Ana and the Orange County Health Care Agency. The group was able to agree on putting policies in the general plan draft, which may be approved by the City

Council as early as Dec. 7. Santa Ana spokesman Paul Eakins said that not all the nonprofit's and UCI researchers' suggestions were included in the draft.

"The Santa Ana City Council has made the health and safety of our residents, including environmental health, paramount," Eakins said in an email. "The city of Santa Ana will continue to work to improve our community's health outcomes under the guidance of the general plan and other city policies and City Council directives."

The general plan draft states: "Work with Orange County Health Care Agency and local stakeholders including Orange County Environmental Justice and UC Irvine Public Health to identify baseline conditions for lead contamination in Santa Ana, monitor indicators of lead contamination, and measure positive outcomes. Collaborate with these organizations to secure grant funds for soil testing and remediation for residential properties in proximity to sites identified with high soil lead levels, with a focus on Environmental Justice census

tracts."

There are several other items in the general plan draft that are aimed at lead exposure. Another item calls for the city to coordinate with the healthcare agency and community organizations to "strengthen local programs and initiatives to eliminate lead-based paint hazards, with priority given to residential buildings located within environmental justice area boundaries." The federal government banned consumer uses of lead-containing paint in 1978. Alana LeBrón, a UC Irvine assistant professor of public health and Chicano/Latino studies, said in the past that census data shows the majority of houses in Santa Ana were built prior to that ban. LeBrón partnered with Orange County Environmental Justice on its lead analysis.

The draft also includes an item to train local residential contractors to prevent lead contamination and a general statement to "make homes more healthful by addressing health hazards associated with lead-based paint, asbestos, vermin, mold, VOC-laden materials and prohibiting

smoking in multifamily projects, among others." Flores is particularly pleased with the city's commitment in the plan to partner with the O.C. Health Care Agency and other local organizations to increase blood lead testing, outreach, education and referral services.

"So that we think is a good step, because there's a huge problem in the state of California where the majority of youth are not being properly tested for lead contamination in their blood," Flores said. "... So it would be helpful to get a better sense of how many youth in Santa Ana are being affected by this issue."

But Flores hopes the city will follow through with its commitments because general plans are more of a blueprint.

"We think that while there are some good policies in place now, it is not necessarily sufficient to address the full extent of the problem," Flores said.

Furthermore, Flores doesn't know how the city will qualify whether an area is in need of remediation because of the differing state and federal lead standards.

"But what's not clear is at what level because the federal EPA has a different standard than California EPA," Flores said. "We're asking for 80 parts per million, since that significantly affects the IQ of children."

In response to a question about what standard of lead toxicity the city will use, Eakins said that "lead remediation work in Santa Ana is anticipated to be done in collaboration with [the O.C. Health Care Agency] and relevant guidelines."

When asked if the city was legally required to carry out the environmental justice items in the general plan draft, Eakins responded: "In general, all zoning and land use decisions must be consistent with the general plan. The city is required to carry out the implementation plan associated with each element, subject to the availability of funding, staffing and other

See **Lead**, page R8



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**CENTER**

*Continued from page R1*

County," LeBrón said over the phone. "The environmental health disparities are pretty substantial. And I think we're really only sort of scratching at the tip of the iceberg in terms of environmental justice issues in Orange County."

"I think in part that gets obscured because Orange County is this tale of two counties. We've got the elite, wealthy, predominantly white residents and coastal communities, and then in more inland areas in northern Orange County, we have lower-income, working-class communities and communities of color who are burdened by the differential concentration of industrial land uses in their communities. Plus, significant population density that's not counterbalanced by access to green space, parks and cooling spaces."

Wu noted the surge of case studies showing rampant environmental inequity in Latino, Black and other vulnerable communities throughout the country. Research has shown that decades of racist housing and environmental policies have led to Black and Latino communities being subjected to polluted air and soil.

"We have a long way to go in terms of translating that research into action," LeBrón said. "I think that a key part of doing so depends on community engagement, on really having affected communities be at the center of the process."

LeBrón said that health and environmental disparities in Orange County are relatively understudied.

The pandemic revealed significant disparities for the Latino community in Orange County as it took the brunt of the cases and lagged behind in vaccinations.

After facing mounting pressure for the inequities, the county partnered with the nonprofit AdvanceOC to release a health equity map, which identifies the cities and neighborhoods that are most in need. The map scores cities based on



Courtesy of Kim Konte

**IRVINE RESIDENTS** say All American Asphalt Plant, pictured left, is spreading toxic fumes in the region.

social progress, which includes components like nutrition and medical care, water and sanitation and environmental quality.

Santa Ana, Anaheim, Garden Grove, Westminster and Stanton, cities with high Latino and Asian populations, scored the lowest on the social progress index.

The county has said that it used the map to determine where it should perform vaccine outreach. Karin Kalk, director of project management and quality improvement at the agency, said in a prior interview that the county deployed mobile vaccination units to the neighborhoods and census tracts that were most in need of the vaccine.

However, Orange County is behind other neighboring counties in vaccinating the Latino population.

LeBrón and Wu have worked with the nonprofit Orange County Environmental Justice to study lead in Santa Ana. After conducting extensive testing, researchers found that potentially unhealthy levels of lead were in low-income and predominately Latino neighborhoods. LeBrón said they are continuing to research the sources of the lead, whether that be historical leaded gasoline, lead paint or other sources. Researchers are also conducting a historical analysis of land use in Santa Ana to help understand the correlation between elevated lead levels and historical land uses. LeBrón said those analyses could be completed by December or January.

Currently, OC Environmental Justice is working to get the city and Orange County Health Care Agency to remediate the issue.

"We're hopeful that the two analyses that are underway will begin to help us understand who is accountable for the soil levels in the city," LeBrón said.

Wu also worked on air quality issues in the Madison Park neighborhood in Santa Ana, which is near dozens of industrial buildings that may emit noxious fumes. Wu said the Zip code has one of the highest rates of asthma-related emergency room visits in Orange County. The neighborhood also suffers from groundwater pollution, according to a letter former California Atty. Gen. Xavier Becerra sent to Santa Ana last year to encourage the city to improve its environmental justice measures in its general plan.

She also provided air sensors to residents in North Irvine to test potentially noxious fumes coming from an asphalt plant. Wu said the tests ended up being inconclusive because the sensors weren't reliable, but residents continue to contend that the fumes coming from the All American Asphalt facility are toxic and endangering themselves and their children.

"Our main goal is to establish an environmentally just society where Black and other disadvantaged communities will thrive with health equity," Wu said.

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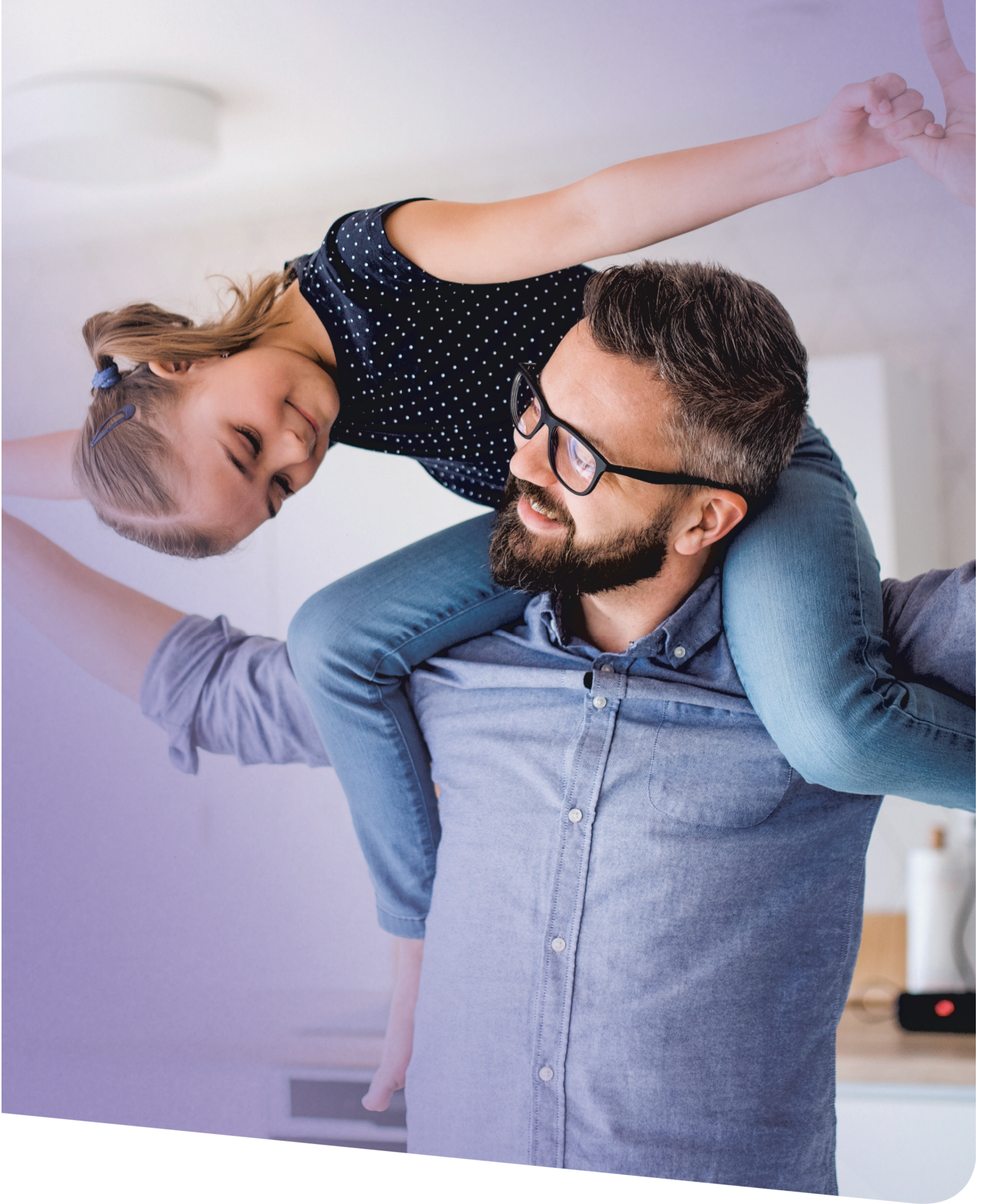
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# O.C. Public Libraries partner with In-N-Out for children's reading club

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

Orange County Public Libraries are teaming up once again with favored Southern California burger chain, In-N-Out, as a part of the Cover to Cover Club.

"Children receive a reading log to keep track of the books they read," said Beatriz Preciado, programs coordinator for O.C. Public Libraries.

"A parent or guardian signs the reading log after each five books read. If the children are unable to read themselves, their parents may read books to them."

Once a young reader has read five books, they receive an Achievement Award, redeemable for a free hamburger or cheeseburger at any In-N-Out location.

The program is open to

children ages 4 to 12 with library cards and runs through Nov. 13. Each reader is eligible to receive a certificate with every five books read, with a limit of three during the programs run.

Children can participate at any O.C. Public Library location and should claim their Achievement Award at the same library where they registered.

"All O.C. Public Libraries' branches are participating in the In-N-Out Cover to Cover Club program," Preciado said.

In-N-Out invites public libraries to participate in the program annually, and O.C. Public Libraries has partnered with the burger chain for several years to offer the Cover to Cover Club to the community.

Incentivized reading programs tied with popular



**A READER ENJOYS** a book at a public library in Orange County.

restaurants are often a favorite for younger readers. Some millennials may remember programs like Book-It with Pizza Hut, for example.

"Books and food are a great combination," Preci-



Photos courtesy of Orange County Public Libraries

**O.C. PUBLIC LIBRARIES** is partnering with In-N-Out Burger for a children's reading club.

ado said. "These programs help build positive memories associated with the participating restaurant. Not only does it allow families to visit one of their favorite restaurants for their reward, it also instills the love of literacy at a young age and celebrates the child's efforts."

Reading itself is enriching, Preciado adds, but

prize incentives can be a great motivator. "Reading is gratifying on its own, but there is nothing more exciting than being rewarded for reading."

Besides the Cover to Cover club, O.C. Public Libraries offers a multitude of programs.

"We offer in-person and virtual programs and services that run the gamut for

all ages," Preciado said.

"From story times to book clubs and crafts of the month, library users have an opportunity to engage with our local libraries in any capacity they'd like. There is certainly something for everyone."

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## WORKERS

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spot areas inside Kingspan's two-building facility. They carefully followed instructions from previous training sessions: Don't bump the devices into any hard surfaces or stuff them in pants pockets. If anyone smokes a cigarette or uses hand sanitizer around them, make a note of it.

Most importantly, if management became curious about the small, black monitors slung around their necks or dangling off their belt loops, the workers were ethically bound to answer any questions about them, even if it led to being fired.

"The truth is I felt a bit nervous," Maldonado said. "I'm not going to deny that. But as the hours passed, I saw that the managers didn't say anything to me or my co-workers. We started gaining more and more courage. We had to find out how much pollution there was inside."

At the end of their shifts, the workers collected all the stationary monitors and left without incident. For the next two days, they repeated the task.

The effort came amid a renewed union drive with the International Assn. of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) that was unsuccessful last year. Kingspan responded to the initial campaign by raising wages, but worker concerns about indoor air pollution remained.

Masri, an air pollution expert, analyzed data from the monitors for his study, which measured fine particulate matter, an air pol-



Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

**ISRAEL MALDONADO** holds a AtmoTube Pro to measure the air quality of his workplace.

lutant that can pose health hazards in high enough concentrations.

The results, published this week under Masri's independent consulting and research firm, appeared to confirm the workers' worst fears; the average concentration of air pollution inside Kingspan's two buildings exceeded outdoor levels in Santa Ana during last year's wildfires by 25%.

"During the San Francisco wildfire plume, which carried to Southern California last year, the highest [level] I measured was about 80 micrograms per cubic meter on the AtmoTube Pro that I have here outside of my house," added Masri, an Orange resident. "Those were levels that were causing public health agencies to warn people to stay indoors and avoid exercise."

The average measurement inside Kingspan: 112.3 micrograms per cubic meter, which was nearly seven times higher than the readings found outside of the factory.

"To see workers being exposed to levels for hours at



Don Leach

**DR. SHAHIR MASRI** holds an air monitoring device.

a time each day that were far in excess of what I have measured outdoors during wildfire events, it was just very shocking to me," Masri added.

And sometimes, the devices maxed out, especially at welding stations like the one Pacheco works at; his readings registered a "very unhealthy" average by Environmental Protection Agency standards and topped AtmoTube Pro's 1,000 micrograms per cubic meter limit at times.

"We don't have good fume extractors," Pacheco said. "Sometimes we're welding for 10 hours and

that generates a lot of fumes."

Masri's findings helped form the basis of an Oct. 15 complaint filed with California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health by the workers against the company. Cal/OSHA inspectors followed up by visiting Kingspan last week after a delegation of workers asked management to allow them to choose whether to unionize with SMART or not without intimidation.

"We fully respect the employees legal right to organize and we are open to dialogue in this regard," read a statement from Kingspan Light and Air. "We await a report following an inspection by the Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA). The health and safety of our team is of paramount importance and we will comply with, and act on, any recommendations contained in that report."

Kingspan is a relative newcomer to Santa Ana's industrial corridor after having set up shop in 2016. Billing itself as climate conscious with a 10-year "Planet Passionate" pledge to reduce carbon emissions, Kingspan has about 166 factories worldwide and earned \$5.5 billion in global sales last year. According to a half-yearly financial report, it reported record-breaking revenue and trading profits across the board through June 2021, including a 39% increase of "Light + Air" sales, as construction rebounded from the pandemic.

Local Kingspan workers met with Santa Ana Mayor Vicente Sarmiento last week about their concerns amid the company's pan-

demic profits.

"All workers in Santa Ana have the right to a safe and healthy workplace, and any allegations of unhealthy working conditions is troubling," Sarmiento said. "Workers should also have the right to collectively bargain to ensure conditions such as this are remedied."

The mayor encouraged any workers with similar concerns to contact appropriate agencies like Cal/OSHA while also noting that the city's draft General Plan update addresses regulations aimed at curbing air pollution exposure.

Prior to Kingspan, Masri's recent work surrounded heavy metal soil contamination found in Santa Ana's poorer, more heavily Latino neighborhoods. He turned to the question of air pollution next for a still-unpublished study that enlisted citizen scientists to take "toxic tours" around the city's industrial corridor with AtmoTube Pro devices in order to address the concerns of a neighborhood council.

It was during the course of that community-oriented research that Masri learned of the situation at Kingspan and those same air monitors found new use.

His resulting report recommends simple fixes to improve ventilation and indoor air quality along with it, including safely opening any doors and windows that remain closed during working hours.

"This is unlikely to have an impact on the surrounding neighborhoods," he said. "A more sophisticated level is equipping these workers with respirators and supplied air."

The report also urges

Kingspan to pick up where the workers left off by conducting continuous monitoring of indoor and outdoor air pollution levels with PurpleAir sensors as well as installing HEPA filters to improve ventilation.

It's a course correction that finds favor with Maldonado.

"We started this campaign first and foremost for worker safety," he said. "We've been without proper ventilation for some time."

In the past, Maldonado said that a day's work left his nasal passages full of dust while fiberglass shards stuck to his work clothes. In November, he fell ill with COVID-19 on the cusp of the winter surge that turned Santa Ana into an epicenter of infection. Maldonado believes that poor ventilation at Kingspan and the inability to practice social distancing on the assembly line played a role in his illness as well as many of his mostly Latino co-workers.

Many questions remain unanswered, including if the unhealthy levels of indoor air pollution measured by the workers correlate with any adverse medical conditions suffered by them. But in the meantime, Maldonado and Pacheco are looking for changes on the job that will literally be a breath of fresh air.

"We hope that by forming a union, it will help fix many things like bringing in good extractors," Pacheco said. "The most important thing is our health, so that we can continue living and working."

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## LEAD

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necessary resources."

Undocumented immigrants make up a significant portion of the Santa Ana population, and many are located in the neighborhoods impacted by lead contamination.

Considering many lack access to healthcare, Flores said the nonprofit pushed the city to work with the healthcare agency to ensure access to medical care for this vulnerable population. Flores said that request didn't move forward.

Flores said the nonprofit also asked for better tenant protections so landlords can't jack up rent after paying for lead remediation. On Tuesday night, the City Council narrowly approved ordinances for rent control, limiting residential rent increases to no more than 3% per year, and just-cause evictions, preventing landlords from terminating a lease without just cause after 30 days.

Flores also mentioned that the council recently passed a sweeping climate resolution that says the city will investigate and implement policies to limit or prevent exposure to lead and other environmental toxins. However, a resolution lacks the authority of an ordinance.

"So really it's more useful as a negotiation point," Flores said.

LeBrón said researchers are continuing to analyze the sources of the lead, whether from past use of leaded gasoline, lead paint or other sources. Researchers are also conducting a historical analysis of land use in Santa Ana to help understand the correlation between elevated lead levels and historical land uses. LeBrón said those analyses could be completed by December or January.

"We're hopeful that the two analyses that are underway will begin to help us understand who is accountable for the soil levels in the city," LeBrón said.

LeBrón, who sat in on several of the round-table meetings, criticized the city and Orange County Health Care Agency for initially being dismissive of residents' concerns about lead following the Cabrera report.

"I'm a public health professor and, honestly, I give our local public health a failing grade for handling resident concerns about lead," LeBrón said. "They have been incredibly dismissive of residents' concerns."

In October 2020, as the city was engaging in talks with Orange County Environmental Justice, former California Atty. Gen. Xavier Becerra's office sent a letter to the city taking issue with the city's lack of engagement with the community



**THIS SANTA** Ana lot with possible lead contamination will be changed into a community garden.

Don Leach

and providing several suggestions of improvement for the city's environmental justice portion of its general plan draft. The state requires local governments to address environmental justice in their general plans under SB 1000.

"We appreciate the city's efforts to address environmental justice in its General Plan through inclusion of [environmental justice] policies," the letter says. "However, we are concerned that the [environmental justice] policies are not sufficient to reduce the unique and compounded health risks to communities as required by SB 1000, nor do they adequately address the specific requirements of SB 1000."

The letter states that there are 17 census tracts in the city designated as disadvantaged communities, according to CalEnviroScreen, a screening tool developed by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, a branch of the California EPA. It specifically com-

mended the city for addressing lead contamination in its general plan draft, but recommended that the city strengthen the existing measures and add additional ones to address the lead issue.

The city responded to the letter later that month, stating that "the city's engagement and outreach efforts to the community and [environmental justice] neighborhoods over the past five years have been substantial and have resulted in a general plan that reflects the voice and the values of the community and our residents."

However, Eakins said that the city intensified its community engagement this year after receiving the letter with 11 community forums and an online community survey. Eakins also said that the city made changes to the general plan draft to strengthen the lead contamination items.

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Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

**MASON LOPES** and his mother, Charissa, smile in the playground at Beyond Blindness in North Tustin.

## BEYOND

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vocacy with the goal of bringing a focus to the realities of living without sight.

They are realities Lopes said she wishes more people would acknowledge.

"Just being out in society, just doing our day to day stuff, people make comments, people look, people stare, and so depending on the day that can be really hard. Especially, if I am already having a tough day," Lopes said. "Like any mom, I just want people to love him and accept him."

Lopes said it's also important for parents to talk to their own kids.

"I wish more people would have conversations

with their children," Lopes said.

"Just because a child looks different, acts different, can't talk like you do or walk like you do, it doesn't make them weird. It just makes them unique, and we are all unique. Teach kids to just be friendly and kind to each other regardless."

Though Lopes said kindness is not a common experience for her family. "I always say Mason's super power is attracting angels into his life."

Like the lyrics of Mason's favorite song, most people recognize he is beautiful in his way.

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