



**JESI PEARCE** chats with a local homeless woman on 17th Street as she delivers gift bags to the homeless in the Newport Beach-Costa Mesa area. *Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer*

## N.B. couple comes home to holiday 'miracle'

Their apartment was destroyed by a fire in September. A women's running group surprised them with a new unit.

**BY MATT SZABO**

The term "home for the holidays" means something different and much more special this year to Newport Beach residents Judy and Lou Candelaria.

They walked into their new unit at the Promontory Point apartments on Thursday morning. Several members of a Corona del Mar women's running group were there to surprise them with their new place.

Everyone was calling it a Christmas miracle. For Judy, 77, and Lou, 87, it was a sublime end to a rough 2022.

Ever since the Candelarias moved to Newport Beach from Chicago more than 30 years ago, two things have been true. They called unit No. 453 at the apartment complex just south of Pacific Coast Highway home, and they went to Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic church.

But on a fateful Sunday morning in September, they lost nearly everything in the four-alarm Promontory Point fire.

"We heard no fire alarms, but we heard banging on the doors and people yelling and screaming," Judy Candelaria said. "I said to Lou, 'Oh my God, there must really be a party somewhere.'"

Chaos reigned in the hours to follow. Judy said she was allowed back into the apartment but only to get essentials — medicine and shoes for Lou and glasses for herself.

The Irvine Co., which operates Promontory Point, put the Candelarias in another temporary unit at the property. It was something,

*See Home, page A4*

## Pair bring gifts and smiles to homeless community

**BY LILLY NGUYEN**

Contrary to popular belief, Santa doesn't always need a chimney, stockings or a tree to leave presents. He doesn't need any milk or cookies either.

Christopher Zimmerman was sleeping soundly in Costa Mesa's Pinkley Park on Thursday afternoon, nestled on top of a few jackets he'd strewn out beneath him to keep the wet grass at bay. Just a few feet away from him was another resting and temporary park resident, next to whom lain a brightly colored tote filled with practical gifts, newly placed by a passing stranger.

Zimmerman awoke to the sound of a rustling bag and a friendly greeting from Newport Beach resident Jesi Pearce, asking if she could give him a gift and a hug.

"You guys are fantastic," Zimmerman said, as he looked through his bag, which contained a reusable water bottle, chocolates, toothpaste, toothbrushes, blankets, socks and a \$20 gift card to McDonald's. Zimmerman smiled as Pearce sat down

*See Gifts, page A4*



**JESI PEARCE** hugs a homeless man after giving him a holiday gift bag on Newport Boulevard in Costa Mesa. Along with chocolates and sundries, the bag had a \$20 McDonald's gift card.

## Brunch for the entire bunch: 3 O.C. spots sure to satisfy your hunger

**BY EDWIN GOEI**

You're not imagining it — the air on weekend mornings in Orange County does smell more like bacon and maple syrup these days. Breakfast and brunch concepts are sizzling hot right now. If you can pardon the pun: They're selling like hotcakes. Nep Cafe in Fountain Valley, Toast in Tustin and Breezy in San Juan Capistrano are a few of the recent entrants. In fact, the latter two were featured on these very pages in the past month.

But a great brunch was always possible before this recent renaissance. However, since no single brunch spot can satisfy every preference, here are three different options for the vegans, the gluttons and the families with kids — because everyone needs a good brunch joint to call their own.

### A VEGAN BRUNCH EVEN CARNIVORES WOULD LIKE GRACIAS MADRE

1617 Westcliff Drive, Newport Beach; weekends, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; entrees: \$14.50 to \$23.50

An unsuspecting meat-eater might be lured into Gracias Madre not knowing they've walked into a vegan restaurant. The outdoor patio, which is shaded by a roof made of reeds and boxed in on all four sides with a lush green hedge, has an atmosphere as lulling as the Garden of Eden. The bar is so opulent that no one standing behind it can be referred to as anything less than



*Edwin Goei*

**THE SUNDAY** brunch buffet line at Citrus City Grille in Orange.

a "mixologist." Gracias Madre's vibe is, in a word, tasteful.

But "tasteful" is an adjective that applies more to its Mexican cuisine than its interior design. And if a meat-eater should won-

der "Does it taste good enough that I won't notice the absence of bacon and cheese?" the answer is an unequivocal "Yes."

*See Brunch, page A6*

## Retiring FVFD Chief Ron Cookston honored to have served hometown

**BY ANDREW TURNER**

Ron Cookston has noticed lately that everyone from family and friends to his own colleagues would like a few minutes of his time.

As he approached the end of his three-decade-long career with the Fountain Valley Fire Department, the homegrown fire chief has reminisced about serving the town in which he grew up.

"It's been the honor of my life just to serve people," Cookston,

54, said. "We're a unique organization that no matter what somebody calls us for, if they need help, we will respond, and if we aren't able to solve the problem ourselves, we will find that help that will help them solve any problem they have."

"That's been the joy, and that's been the excitement ... to help people when they're in their time of need, they're in distress, to be able to relieve them of that."

*See Chief, page A2*

### ALSO FROM THE DAILY PILOT:



*Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer*

**WREATH-LAYING CEREMONY IS PART OF A GROWING EFFORT TO REMEMBER VETERANS DURING THE HOLIDAYS** PAGE A3



# More than 1,200 toys handed out at Boys & Girls Club of Santa Ana's annual Winter Wonderland

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

The holiday season is about more than presents, but for some Orange County children presents are not guaranteed. In an effort to get a Christmas toy to each child and create a special holiday memory, the Boys & Girls Club of the Central Orange Coast hosted Winter Wonderland at the Santa Ana club on Dec. 17.

"Today we are distributing toys to over 500 kids in the Santa Ana community," said Robert Santana, chief executive officer of the Boys & Girls Club of Central Orange Coast. "We have really made this event about a Christmas memory and experience."

The Boys & Girls Club of the Central Orange Coast has 66 locations in Orange County that serves 9,500 youth annually. Close to 600 members lined up at the Boys & Girls Club of Santa Ana on West Highland Street on Saturday for Winter Wonderland, an event that for many has become a holiday tradition.

Santana said events like Winter Wonderland are extremely important because they emphasize that everyone in the community is valued and cared for.

"The Boys & Girls Club for almost 80 years has been an institution and is always here for families, whether it is providing toys or school books," Santana said. "We collect backpacks during the school year and get food out to the community for families that are food insecure."

"For us, it is a commitment to make sure every family has that support system."

Children arriving for the event were first matched with a Boys & Girls Club volunteer, or Santa's helper, as the staff refers to them. The volunteer builds a rapport with the child and escorts them through the Winter Wonderland experience.

"First they start off in Mrs. Claus's art studio," said Santana. "They get to decorate their own Christmas ornament."

Next, they walk through the "North Pole" where arched lights and fake snow lead to Santa's Workshop inside the games room. In Santa's workshop, hundreds of donated toys are stacked according to age group.



Photos courtesy of Boys & Girls Club of Central Orange Coast

**KIDS AT** Boys & Girls Club of Central Orange Coast's Winter Wonderland event on Dec. 17 display their gifts of choice from the toy drive.



**BABY YODA** and Star Wars toys were a popular choice at Winter Wonderland.

"The kids get to pick from whatever toy they would like," Santana said.

Santa's workshop is filled with toys from community and corporate partners, like Pacific Life and the Argyros Family Foundation, as well as organized toy drives. Orange City Fire Department, for example, dropped off a truckload of toys for the event.

"All the toys that we have here are collected by the

community, for the kids in the community," said Santana. "It is really special to us because for some of these kids that participate today, this may be the only toy they get during the holiday season."

Baby Yoda and Star Wars toys along with Disney Princess toys were popular picks for younger kids while older kids went for bikes and skateboards.

After Santa's workshop,

kids meet Santa and Mrs. Claus. A professional photographer takes their photo together and prints it out on the spot to take home.

"The last station is hot cocoa and cookies," said Santana. "The child is reconnected with their parents, and the volunteer goes all the way back to the beginning and meets the next member."

Winter Wonderland is



**SANTA'S WORKSHOP** full of donated toys at Boys & Girls Club of Central Orange Coast's Winter Wonderland event.

one of three holiday events coordinated by Boys & Girls Club of Central Orange Coast.

"Last week we distributed toys to our kids in the Orange sites that we have. Today, this is our biggest event in Santa Ana, and next week we will be distributing toys in Costa Mesa to the kids we serve in that community."

While children are with their volunteer, parents are hosted at a nearby bilingual resource fair.

"We have additional resources, we give out special prizes and we connect them to additional support services in the

community. That way the parents have some activities while their kid is in the space," Santana said.

Santana said that while the kids are excited for toys, he hopes they get even more from the event.

"The goal today is not just a toy but that Christmas memory, that experience that should hopefully last a lifetime," said Santana. "These events are really focused around making sure the Christmas spirit is alive and well in our community."

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## CHIEF

Continued from page A1

Cookston had many well-wishers at the Fountain Valley City Council meeting on Tuesday, his final one as the head of the city's fire department. His last day was Friday.

Mayor Kim Constantine read off a proclamation recognizing Cookston for his 29 years of full-time service to the city, during which he held the positions of firefighter, paramedic, fire engineer, fire captain, paramedic coordinator, training officer, battalion chief and fire chief.

"This is so you," Constantine remarked, as she traversed the proclamation's many clauses. The one directly preceding her comment stated, "Chief Cookston is inherently driven, leading those around him by raising the bar and nurturing an environment that values integrity, cohesion, knowledge, collaboration, due diligence, inclusion, planning, preparation, volunteerism and sound decision-making."

A 1986 graduate of Fountain Valley High, Cookston revealed that his first job was to deliver the Daily Pilot when he was in the fourth grade at Courreges Elementary.

"I delivered to 57 houses in Fountain Valley," Cookston said. "It was getting up in the morning and folding the papers, just stuffing them into bags, and making sure that they're delivered correctly. ... The customer, following up and talking to them when I would do collections. It was my first experience toward what dedication to something felt like."

Cookston would go on to be a heavy equipment operator and a diesel mechanic right out of high school, before a dinner with a cousin who was in the fire service pushed him in that direction.

"I've always volunteered for things," Cookston added. "I was happier to mow my neighbor's lawn than to mow my own when I was a kid. I just really enjoyed helping people, and I think



**RON COOKSTON** is retiring as Fountain Valley's fire chief. He has led the city's fire department since 2019.

Courtesy of Fountain Valley Fire Department

that's what drew me to the fire service."

Promoted to fire chief in 2019, Cookston oversaw the department during the coronavirus pandemic. City Manager Maggie Le noted Cookston's department worked closely with the senior community during that time.

With Cookston as its fire chief, the fire department reorganized its command staff to include the position of division chief, which he said provided a succession plan for future leadership. Fountain Valley also added a full-time emergency medical services manager.

"When you're homegrown, I think every single decision you make, it's much more gratifying because it's close to your heart," said Le, a homegrown city leader in her own right as a

Los Amigos High graduate. "Your mission is to make a positive impact in the community that you grew up and hold so dear."

Division Chief Bill McQuaid will be promoted to fire chief, starting his new role on Dec. 30, Le said. Cookston remarked that McQuaid graduated from Fountain Valley High the same year he did.

"He's been there a couple years less than me, and he is ready and equipped to march forward with what our strategic plan was and to foster what we've done in the past and embrace the future," Cookston said of McQuaid. "We couldn't have a better leader in succeeding the department than Bill McQuaid."

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# Wreath-laying ceremony salutes fallen vets

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

Maj. Jeffrey T. Goeggel of Civil Air Patrol, U.S. Air Force Auxiliary always remembers our military veterans, but during the holiday season he pays special respect.

"It is important to let children know these were men and women that served the country and gave us rights to our freedoms that we now enjoy," he said.

Service members sacrifice their time and safety every day of the year, Goeggel said, and to honor them, he and other members of Fullerton Composite Squadron 56 participated in 12th annual National Wreaths Across America Day held at Memory Garden Memorial Park in Brea on Dec. 17.

"This is probably our fifth year participating in the program," Goeggel said.

Wreaths Across America is a nonprofit founded to expand the annual wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery started in 1992 by Maine businessman Morrill Worcester.

"He made wreaths out of Christmas trees that he had left over," said Goeggel.

The mission of Wreaths Across America is to remember the fallen, honor those who serve and teach children the value of freedom. This year, nearly 3,000 participating locations placed wreaths on the graves of veterans in conjunction with the Arlington ceremony.

"We are forever grateful for the thousands of supporters who dedicate their time and efforts to fulfilling our mission on a local level," Wreaths Across America executive director Karen Worcester said in a statement.

Fullerton Composite Squadron 56 joined other local wreath sponsors including Vietnam Veterans of America & Auxiliary Chapter 1024, Cub Scout Pack #737, Boy Scout Troop #93 and the Yorba Linda Women's Club for the ceremony that began at 9 a.m. and included wreath-laying ceremonies, memorial services and a bugler playing "Taps," the United States military call at funerals.

Civil Air Patrol is the official auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force and hosts a cadet program for youth ages 12 to 18, some of whom participated in the ceremony in Brea. Goeggel became involved in the



Photos by Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

U.S. MILITARY personnel place wreaths atop tombstones during National Wreaths Across America Day on Dec. 17 at Memory Gardens Cemetery.

nonprofit organization in 2001, right after 9/11.

"I have been taking part in the program ever since," he said. "I started out as a second lieutenant then a first lieutenant then up to captain. I was captain for about 3½ years before becoming a major."

Next year, Goeggel hopes to be promoted to lieutenant colonel.

Wreaths Across America honors veterans from the Revolutionary War to present-day conflicts and utilizes sponsors to raise funds for the wreaths. One individual wreath sponsorship is priced at \$15, and five wreaths are \$75. The organization depends on volunteers, and this year, more than 2 million volunteers participated nationwide in laying wreaths on veterans' graves.

Memory Garden hosts 7,000

veteran gravesites and raised funds for 851 wreaths. Westminster's Memorial Park and Mortuary, which hosts 5,990 veterans' graves, also participated in the event, its second year of doing so.

Wreaths Across America hopes the organization continues to expand with more volunteers and sponsors each year.

"These individuals and their communities know the value of remembering the fallen, honoring those who currently serve and teaching the next generation about the sacrifices made for our freedom every day," said Worcester. "Without their continued support, Wreaths Across America would not exist."

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VOLUNTEERS help place wreaths atop tombstones during National Wreaths Across America Day.

## THE DAILY COMMUTER PUZZLE

By Jacqueline E. Mathews

### ACROSS

- 1 Rickles & Cheadle
- 5 \_ of time; early
- 10 Aroma
- 14 Notion
- 15 Long-winded
- 16 Needless fuss
- 17 Endings for Gator & lemon
- 18 Lawn game
- 20 Powerful hallucinogen
- 21 Can covers
- 22 Rudely brief
- 23 Hideaways
- 25 Pronoun
- 26 Tel Aviv dollar
- 28 Motive
- 31 Birds that cannot fly
- 32 Mantle
- 34 Drill tip
- 36 Steel, mainly
- 37 Batter's dry spell
- 38 Take off
- 39 \_ person; apiece
- 40 Word attached to coach or hand
- 41 Cost
- 42 Rollerbladed
- 44 Military blockades
- 45 Jewel
- 46 Chinese mammal
- 47 Luau greeting
- 50 Part of a theater
- 51 Moth's color
- 54 Throwing the book at
- 57 Burrowing animal
- 58 Polishes off
- 59 Tango or twist
- 60 Up in \_; indignant
- 61 Blemish
- 62 \_ for; decided on
- 63 Abnormal sac

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8	9		10	11	12	13
14					15						16			
17					18						19			
20					21						22			
		23	24							25				
26	27							28				29	30	
31						32	33					34		35
36						37						38		
39					40						41			
	42		43								44			
				45					46					
47	48	49						50				51	52	53
54						55	56					57		
58						59						60		
61						62						63		

### SUDOKU

By The Mephram Group

Complete the grid so each row, column and 3-by-3 box (in bold borders) contains every digit, 1 to 9. For strategies on how to solve Sudoku, visit [sudoku.org.uk](http://sudoku.org.uk).

		1		6		9	5	
	9	7					6	
	5		2					
			6	3				4
8				2				7
9			7	8				
					5		3	
	2					4	1	
	6	8		3		5		

For answers to the crossword and Sudoku puzzles, see page A6.

- 2 \_ and ends; various bits
- 3 Embroidery
- 4 Scandinavian airline
- 5 Spinning
- 6 Parka parts
- 7 Goofs
- 8 Commercials
- 9 Change colors
- 10 Significant \_;
- partners
- 11 Portal
- 12 Some poems
- 13 Valentine flower
- 19 Porterhouse or New York
- 21 Reclines
- 24 Similar in nature
- 25 Pile
- 26 Pass over

- 27 Takes on employees
- 28 "The Eternal City"
- 29 Required
- 30 Sister's daughter
- 32 Not indecent
- 33 Drag something heavy
- 35 Casual shirts
- 37 Wineglass part
- 38 MacMurray or Dryer
- 40 Swipe
- 41 Forest tree
- 43 Shocked
- 44 Drooped
- 46 \_ de Le-n; 1st European in Florida
- 47 Mocks
- 48 \_ years; 2020, 2024, etc.
- 49 Not fooled by
- 50 Fuzzy residue
- 52 Money for the poor
- 53 Robin's home
- 55 Marrying words
- 56 Heat in the microwave
- 57 Londoner's raincoat

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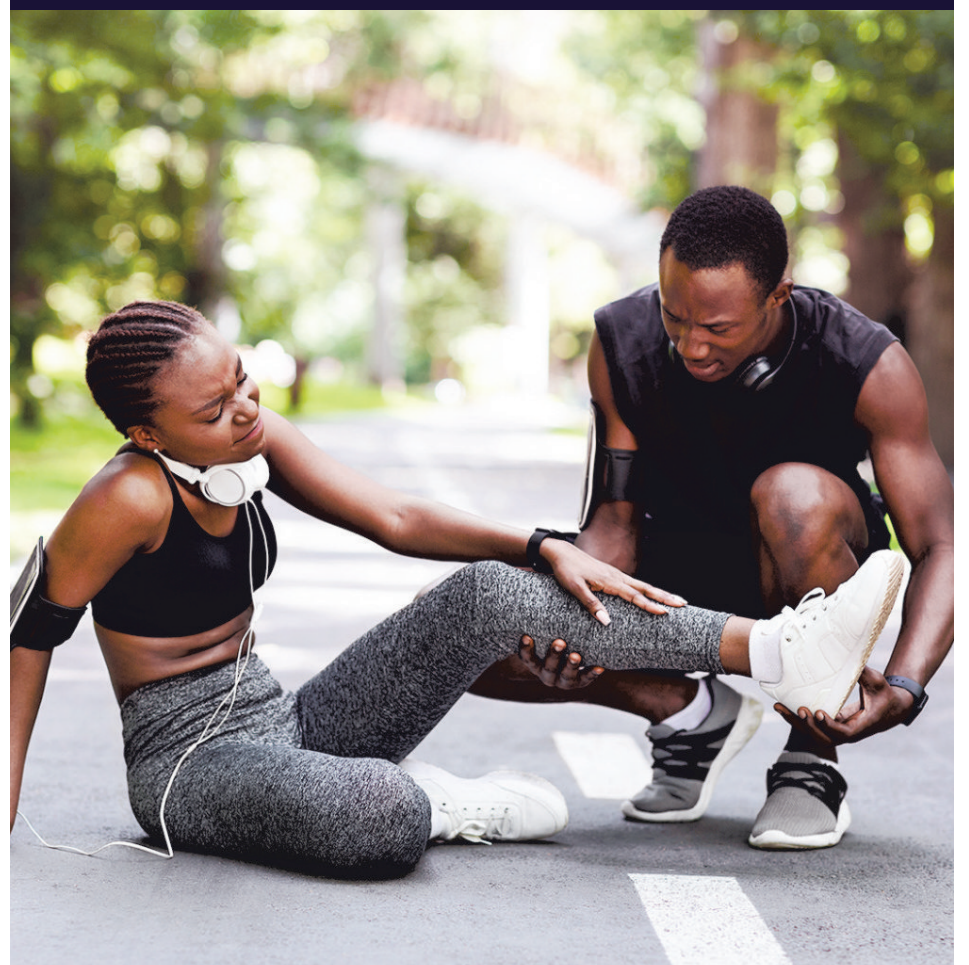
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## HOME

Continued from page A1

but they lost their view of the harbor and Balboa Island that they had grown to love through the decades.

Garth and Claudia Flint, who also attend Our Lady Queen of Angels, heard about the Candelarias' plight. They told their daughter Shannon Eusey, a prominent member of the Inspiration Point running group. The runners sprinted into action to help.

The CdM-based running group values high-level competition. Five of the members — Eusey, Linda Wirta, Jennifer Buckley, Jill Carter and Julie Hart — have run all six of the major world marathons together. But it also values community and stewardship.

"This group is not only supportive in a good way, activity-wise, but it's super-supportive of each other," Eusey said. "Kids with illness, I mean, just life. It's amazing."

Eusey and Wirta helped the Candelarias take care of their lease, but it was a

much more involved team effort to help with furnishing and designing their new apartment. One member of the running group, Malia Petrucci, owns a design group called Tru Studio, which played a major role.

"We just all rallied and set up a way for people to sign up and purchase things," Petrucci said. "It just all came together. We didn't have a TV, and all of a sudden someone just sent money and ordered a TV. It was really a joint effort, after realizing what their Christmas would potentially look like."

Eusey said it has definitely taken a village. On Wednesday night, her son and two of his friends were trying to get a sofa into the new apartment.

As for Judy and Lou, they didn't know what was coming.

"About a month ago or so, Claudia had said, 'Judy, you're going to get a surprise,'" Judy Candelaria said. "And I said, 'Oh, what?' She said that Shannon and her group wanted to do a Christmas miracle for us. That's all I knew."

They walked into their new unit at Promontory Point — fully furnished, thanks to the Inspiration Point runners — on Thursday with their longtime friends, the Flints.

Along with members of the running group, the Candelarias' nephew, Don Gilmartin, was able to be present and in on the surprise. Buckley, who also attends Our Lady Queen of Angels, said a prayer to bless the new home.

"I'm overwhelmed that someone could do this for someone else, to just take the time to do it," Judy Candelaria said. "I'm so happy."

They again have a great view from their patio, and in the corner of their new living room sits a Christmas tree.

Blessings are all around the Candelarias, who are more than grateful to be home for the holidays.

"We really wanted to help them," Wirta said. "It was going to be a Christmas miracle that we pulled off for this well-deserving couple."

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**ABOVE:** Judy and Lou Candelaria react to seeing their new apartment for the first time, after losing nearly everything in the fire at Promontory Point in Newport Beach earlier this year. **LEFT:** Judy right, shares a hug with Shannon Eusey, center, at her new apartment.

Photos by Kevin Chang  
Staff Photographer

## GIFTS

Continued from page A1

next to him under the shade of a nearby tree and wished Pearce's friend and gift-distributing accomplice, Jon Rosen, a Merry Christmas.

"Feliz Navidad! No one ever says that anymore," he added, laughing.

Zimmerman, 64, grew up in Dover Shores and went to Newport Harbor High School before he moved up to the Mammoth Mountain area and, later, June Mountain, where he said all the best skiing was. Then he returned to Newport Beach, where he's been living on and off of the streets.

Zimmerman said this was the second or third time that he's received a gift from Pearce.

"It's very nice of [them] to do this. It's very beautiful. It's nice," said Zimmer-



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

**JESI PEARCE** chats with a homeless man after giving him a holiday gift bag at Pinkley Park in Costa Mesa.

man, as he picked through the bag's contents and handed over things he felt he didn't need to be distributed to people who needed them. Other homeless residents of the city did the same as Pearce and Rosen drove through the Newport-Mesa area.

Two bags were turned away entirely, with their intended recipients asking Pearce and Rosen to give them to people who needed them more.

Pearce and Rosen started the tradition about two years ago.

Pearce said the idea to

give out the gift-filled bags to homeless individuals came about in 2019. Rosen used to be her neighbor and, that Valentine's Day, had distributed small boxes of chocolates.

"I picked up a bunch [of chocolates] later that day and I decided to do it pretty much a couple times of a year," said Pearce. "Valentine's Day and Christmas — I ended up telling [Rosen] and letting him know, 'Hey, you inspired this idea' and he said, 'It's awesome. I want to do that with you.' So, we teamed up."

Rosen typically drives while Pearce is the one who hops out and distributes the tote bags, all the while making a point to smile and offer a hug if the individual is open to it. She said she never tries to force a bag onto someone who doesn't want it, out of respect for personal autonomy.

"I think it really goes beyond what you're just handing them. You're dealing with mental illness, drug addiction. Most homeless people are not treated like human beings. I think that simple act of kindness, of physical interaction ... is meaningful," said Pearce, who added it's important to remember that people without homes seldom choose to live on the street but are led there by circumstance.

Rosen said this year's distribution was their largest. Five bags were given out on Thursday and the remaining 15 on Christmas Eve.

"There's a connection," said Rosen. "Of course, we get a lot [out of the experience] just like they do, but they remember it whether it lasted a moment, a day or a week. That moment is huge. When we ask, 'Can I give you a hug?' Nine out of 10 times, they'll say yes."

Every individual Pearce approached Thursday took her up on that offer.

Pearce and Rosen said they don't seek attention nor expect to be applauded for their effort, but they hope to encourage others to offer what they can to uplift those without a home this holiday season. They encouraged donations to Mercy House and the Lighthouse.

"We would love to see others find a way to spread joy to the homeless. Every contribution, even if just for a moment, is meaningful," said Rosen. "Organizational giving is important, but we pass the homeless every single day. Even without a gift, a smile, a greeting and a moment to acknowledge them and wish them happy holidays goes a long way."

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**THE DINING AREA** at Gracias Madre in Newport Beach, which serves a vegan brunch on weekends.



**HUEVOS RANCHEROS** at Gracias Madre during brunch.

Hill, that precipitously located high-end restaurant with a view, also discontinued its for good.

There are now so very few brunch buffets left in Orange County that it has made Citrus City Grille's Sunday brunch buffet a novelty. And "novel" isn't a word often associated with this long-lived Orange Circle icon. In its more than 25 years in business, it has been a predictable and dependable meat-and-potatoes purveyor of American fare in a town that's Orange County's answer to Mayberry.

But ever since the revival of its brunch buffet to its pre-pandemic glory, it's once again a Sunday morning Mecca for those who've missed limitless slabs of the well-roasted prime rib at the carving station and made-to-order eggs Benedict.

On Sundays, the restaurant gets packed. You can watch the ebb-and-flow of the crowd as they rotate from the chafing dishes of breakfast foods to the hot lunch entrees and back again to the breakfast section for a third helping of bacon — and maybe, another one of those addictive Bananas Foster crepes that eats like a dessert. The privilege of sampling more than two dozen items is included in the \$49 per person entry fee. The price also entitles

you to unlimited access to the self-serve mimosa and Bloody Mary bar that tests your self-control. But isn't that the entire point of a brunch buffet?

**A BRUNCH FOR THE FAMILIES WITH KIDS AND KIDS AT HEART BURNT CRUMBS**

8549 Irvine Ctr Drive, Irvine  
8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily; entrees: \$11.50 to \$15

Burnt Crumbs broke the internet a few years ago with its spaghetti grilled cheese. And it's easy to understand why it struck a chord. It took two childhood staples — mom's spaghetti and grilled cheese — and merged them to make a decadent and cheesy, starch-on-starch, nostalgia sandwich that feels both inventive and excessive.

Like fried butter or bacon ice cream at the county fair, it's probably something parents should only allow their children to eat "just this once," even as they realize that they, themselves, would have one every week if given the chance. Dunked into marinara, consumed with a side of chips and onion dip (when was the last time you had onion dip?), it's a cheat meal to end all cheat meals.

And since you're cheating, you might as well go all the way and order a soufflé pancake. The restaurant is still one of a few places where you can indulge in the viral Japanese invention that incorporates whipped egg white to make pancakes so puffy and covered in strawberry cream that it could double as a birthday cake.

If Burnt Crumbs has an operating principle, it's to offer a brunch without the stuffiness or the need for table service.

Ordering is at the counter, soft drinks are self-serve, and when that spaghetti sandwich is brought to your outdoor table, your inner child rejoices.

But there are also menu choices that are decidedly more adult, like a breakfast salad that asks the question, "What happens when you put breakfast potatoes, bacon and a sunny-side-up egg on top of lettuce and croutons?" The answer: brunch kismet.

Edwin Goei is a contributor to TimesOC.

Photos by Edwin Goei

**BRUNCH**

Continued from page A1

The food here proves what vegans knew all along: treat vegetables with care and respect and they will yield dividends. There's an elote dish the menu calls "grilled street corn" that tastes as though it was plucked at the peak of summer. Each corn kernel bursts with sugary nectar.

And when you scoop up the queso fundido composed of a bean-based Oaxacan chili topped with a melted layer of cashew cheese, you realize that a great Mexican dish does not always need to rely on carnitas or asada.

By the time you try the huevos rancheros, which use soy chorizo instead of real chorizo and tofu in place of eggs, you're not thinking about what's missing; you're thinking how satisfying it all is, with blubbery beans, a bright salsa roja, creamy avocado

and a soft tortilla as the base.

If you must have pancakes, try the banana pancakes. They're so impossibly banana-forward they must be made of mostly fruit, and so substantial, one pancake will make you full the whole day. The entire stack? A whole week.

**A BRUNCH FOR THE BUFFET-LOVING GLUTTONS**

**CITRUS CITY GRILLE**  
122 N. Glassell St., Orange  
Sunday brunch from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.; \$49

COVID-19 was not good for a lot of things, but it decimated brunch buffets. Habana at Irvine Spectrum, once an online sensation for its formidable spread that included whole roasted pig and all-you-can-eat crab legs, nixed its buffet when the pandemic broke. And it won't be bringing it back. Orange



**THE PASTRY TOWER**, a selection during brunch at Citrus City Grille in Orange.



**A SOUFFLE PANCAKE** with strawberry cream at Burnt Crumbs in Irvine.



**BURNT CRUMBS** in Irvine offers outside dining and is open from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily.




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