

Under the Big Top

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

Penelope Elena is a hair suspension artist and insists her practice is not a trick. “It is an ancient discipline, a circus discipline,” Elena said. “People always think it’s fake, but you actually really hang all your weight from your hair.”

Cirque du Soleil’s latest show to come to Laguna Hills.

Elena has been doing dance and gymnastics since she was 4 years old and at the age of 8 began specializing in contortion. She went on to master aerial silks and hoops. About seven years ago she began to develop her hair suspension discipline. “People always asks if it hurts

and yeah, it hurts the first time you hang, but then you get used to it,” she said. Elena is among the talented performers featured in Cirque du Soleil’s “Echo,” coming to Laguna Hills from May 23 to June 29, See **Big Top**, page A9



Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer

ABOVE: Penelope Elena, a hair suspension artist featured in the upcoming Cirque du Soleil “Echo” show in Laguna Hills, demonstrates her flexibility. **LEFT:** Elena and Henrik Veres, from left, carry a surfboard-shaped sign promoting the upcoming show.

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Faith leaders, elected officials break bread, call for peace

BY ERIC LICAS

People representing many of the diverse faiths practiced in Orange County gathered in Newport Beach Thursday to break bread and plead for unity while opening a forum to raise divisive issues affecting communities around the world. More than 100 people shared eggs, sausage, fruit and pastries at the Newport Mesa Irvine Interfaith Council’s Prayer Breakfast, held at The Church of Latter-Day Saints’ campus on Bonita Canyon Drive. Organizers billed “Fostering Peace Amid Global Conflict,” as the topic of that morning’s talks. The event opened with a performance by the All-American Boys Chorus, featuring a capella

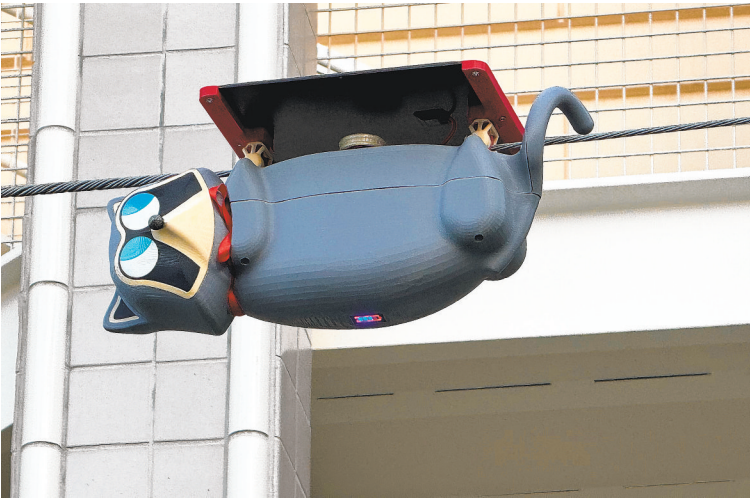


Eric Licas

AKBAR HUSSAINI, executive director of the Newport Mesa Irvine Interfaith Council, prepares tables for a prayer breakfast Thursday.

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ALSO FROM THE DAILY PILOT:



Jessica Peralta

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MAYOR ASHLEIGH AITKEN HAILS ANAHEIM AS A VISITOR CITY FOR ALL IN ANNUAL ADDRESS PAGE A2

THE COACH HOUSE CONCERT HALL CELEBRATES 45 YEARS IN SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO PAGE A7

Irrelevant Week to mark 50 years of roasting and toasting

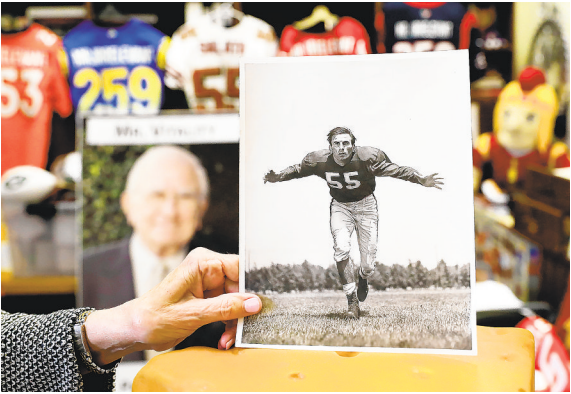
BY ANDREW TURNER

Football fans traveled in packs to go to the NFL draft, with an estimated 600,000 people attending over the three days last week. The draft doesn’t end until a new Mr. Irrelevant is named, that title being bestowed upon the last player selected. Paul Salata, who was a wide receiver at USC before going on to play for the San Francisco 49ers, Baltimore Colts and Pittsburgh Steelers in the NFL, cooked up the idea to celebrate the last selection. A tradition was born in 1976, when Dayton wide receiver Kelvin Kirk was taken by the Steelers with the 487th pick. How appropriate it was that when the 50th member of the Mr. Irrelevant club was chosen on Saturday, April 26, it occurred in the shadow of iconic Lambeau



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

ED FITCH and wife Melanie Salata-Fitch have fun with the two jerseys they brought for this year’s 50th Mr. Irrelevant selection.



MELANIE SALATA-FITCH holds a picture of her football-playing father Paul Salata, who started the annual Mr. Irrelevant celebration which honors the last pick in the NFL draft.

Field in Green Bay, Wis. Memphis cornerback Kobe Minor became the milestone man when the New England Patriots made him the 257th and final player taken. Melanie Salata-Fitch, daughter of the late Paul Salata and the chief executive of Irrelevant Week, discussed the celebration making it to the half-century mark, open-

ing with a dose of the family’s trademark humor. “In 50 words or less?” she quipped, as if the story could be told as such. Salata-Fitch said her father, who died a day shy of his 95th birthday in 2021, would be “flab-

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Mayor hails Anaheim as a visitor city for all

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

The Dapper Dans of Disneyland crooned as they introduced Anaheim Mayor Ashleigh Aitken during her annual State of the City speech at the Grove of Anaheim.

Taking helm of Orange County's most populous city three years ago in a time of turmoil and political corruption, Aitken implied by omission that Anaheim is in a more harmonious place now.

With Disneyland's 70th birthday a few months away and the Honda Center investing in renovations ahead of playing host to Olympic volleyball in 2028, Aitken looked forward to "greater things" to come.

Eschewing a lectern, she confidently strolled along the Grove's stage on Tuesday while boosting Anaheim as a city of immigrants and a global destination.

"As a visitor city, we welcome everyone; from those around the world who have made Anaheim their adopted home to those who come here to visit and enjoy all our city has to offer," Aitken said.

While Disneyland's milestone arrives in July with commemorative merchandise already on the shelves, Aitken touted the arrival of a "new era" with DisneylandForward, a \$2-billion expansion plan on its existing properties.

"Our city has cleared the way with approval on zoning and planning that will expand Anaheim as a global visitor economy in the decades to come," she said of Anaheim City Council's



James Carbone

ANAHEIM MAYOR Ashleigh Aitken is flanked by Disneyland's Dapper Dans during her 2025 State of the City address on Tuesday.

vote approving DisneylandForward a year ago.

With nearly 70% of Anaheim's general fund coming from the Anaheim Resort District, Aitken expected Disneyland's expansion to bring more money for the city's parks, libraries, community centers and public

safety.

Anaheim also negotiated additional community benefits from Disneyland beyond expected tax revenue increases.

"In the coming weeks we will see Disney's first \$15 million contribution to affordable housing in Ana-

heim," Aitken said. "It is the first of two payments, with another \$15 million coming in the next few years."

The corporation has also pledged to contribute \$8 million to the city's parks.

Aitken hailed OC Vibe, another multibillion-dollar project in Anaheim, as

"transformative." The development will turn the land around the Honda Center into a hub of entertainment and housing.

"OC Vibe represents a \$4-billion — with a 'b' — investment in our city," Aitken emphasized. "That's not even counting the \$450

million being directly invested in our Honda Center."

For as vibrant as the business climate in the city appears to be, the Anaheim Chamber of Commerce almost disbanded before the

See *Anaheim*, page A4

The Chao Digestive Health Institute delivers advanced care for the region.

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Cypress city manager accused of 'unlawful acts' by former department head

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

An evening meant to honor Cypress City Manager Peter Grant's work over the past decade began with a laudatory presentation by Cypress Councilwoman Bonnie Peat then later turned.

She praised Grant during Monday's City Council meeting for making Cypress a safer city while adding parks, housing and attracting new businesses. Above all, Peat credited him for Cypress being in solid fiscal shape.

"This is what it's all about," she said. "We have increased our financial strength over the past 10 years. We used our money wisely. We grew our reserves [by] \$50 million [in the same timespan]."

Council members posed for a photo with Grant in front of the dais after Peat's presentation ended.

And then came a bombshell accusation.

Former Public Works Director Doug Dancs, who TimesOC has learned resigned on Dec. 31 with an \$183,000 separation agreement, addressed the council after the presentation and called for Grant's termination.

"After my departure, I waited patiently," Dancs said. "I never expected to return here."

Dancs touted his 23 years of experience as a department head under seven city managers and 28 council members.

"As for the city manager recognition, in my opinion, the City Council should fire the city manager for



DOUG DANCs, Cypress' former director of public works, accused his former boss of "unlawful conduct" during Monday night's City Council meeting.

cause," he said. "This opinion stems from alleged unlawful acts of misconduct during my tenure."

Cypress City Atty. Fred Galante interrupted Dancs before he could continue.

"This is completely inappropriate," Galante said. "These comments should not be made in a public setting."

Galante referenced the separation agreement in urging caution. Dancs argued that the agreement did not prevent him from discussing unlawful acts in the workplace.

Cypress Mayor David Burke gave Dancs the floor, but he demurred.

"I'm not going to continue based upon the city attorney's comment back to me," Dancs said before leaving the council's chambers. "If he's saying anything that I ever learned was confidential then I will

stop."

The brief exchange left the members of the panel flummoxed.

Burke weighed calling an emergency closed session, given the accusation. Councilman Leo Medrano, who was newly elected in November, didn't feel adequately briefed on the surrounding legal issues to give an informed public statement.

"The conservative side of me wants to go ahead and say 'let's hold off on making any comments until we better understand what's going on,'" he said. "But at the same time, I want to be able to be in a city where people can express themselves. However, there are agreements that people are entered into that existed way before I was involved."

The discussion ended soon after Medrano's statement.



Photos by James Carbone

CYPRESS CITY MANAGER Peter Grant smiles during Monday's Cypress City Council meeting in City Hall, where he was praised for his accomplishments over the past decade.

Dancs could not be reached by TimesOC for comment after the meeting.

His accusation also took former Cypress Councilwoman Frances Marquez by surprise as she sat in the audience.

Marquez had criticized Grant's tenure earlier in the meeting and claimed he retaliated against her for complaining about alleged harassment to the city's human resources division. She named him as a defendant alongside past and present Cypress council members in a lawsuit alleging "unconstitutional retaliation."

"Now that Dancs has come forward, it's clear that there's a pattern of behavior," Marquez told TimesOC. "I was not the only one."

Marquez, who served on the City Council until December, claimed to be unaware of any separation

agreement regarding Dancs' employment.

In response to a TimesOC request, Cypress disclosed Dancs separation agreement as a public record.

Interviewed by phone, Galante said that he is not authorized to disclose what preceded Dancs' separation agreement, which was signed in late October by Dancs and current Councilman Scott Minikus when the latter served as Cypress mayor.

Its terms include a confidentiality and non-disparagement clause.

Disparaging remarks are defined as "false information" that show a "reckless disregard to its truth or falsity."

But the agreement doesn't prevent Dancs from "discussing or disclosing information about unlawful acts in the workplace, such as harassment or discrimination or any other

conduct" he has reason to believe is unlawful.

"The agreement does not allow him to raise past complaints that predated the agreement," Galante told TimesOC.

It remains to be seen whether Cypress takes any legal action against Dancs or if council members call for a closed or special meeting in the future to discuss matters surrounding his accusation.

In the meantime, Marquez is calling for an outside investigation into Grant with a report that will be transparent to all about its findings.

"The residents of Cypress have the right to know the outcome of an investigation," she said. "They deserve to know the truth about our city's highest ranking employee."

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UCI Robot Ecology Lab inspired by nature

BY JESSICA PERALTA

Suspended on a cable fixed between two trees in front of the Engineering Gateway building on UC Irvine's campus hangs the RaccoonBot. And well, he's just adorable.

"The 'cute factor' wasn't just a design choice — it was a strategic one," said Efraín Méndez, a mechatronics engineer with a doctorate in engineering sciences focused in robotics and a postdoctoral researcher in the UCI Robot Ecology Lab who spearheaded the RaccoonBot project.

"We wanted RaccoonBot to feel approachable and spark curiosity, especially in younger audiences or people who may not typically engage with robotics or environmental monitoring. By giving it an animal-inspired, friendly appearance, we turned it into more than just a machine — it became a character that invites interaction and storytelling."

He said that emotional connection helps make their mission at the lab more relatable. The mission, put simply, is to study the relationship between robot and its environment in the context of coordinating large teams of robots — also known as swarm robotics. Their research is based in the study of how animals — like birds and fish that naturally swarm — function in their habitats. Much of their robotics research is inspired by nature.

In practice, the mission is much more complex, requiring refined skillsets, high levels of educational backgrounds, creativity and collaboration.

"My research for a long time has been on swarm robotics, so large teams of robots doing interesting things together. This could be robots in the air, robots on the ground or even robots underwater, and I've been looking at questions with fleets of self-driving cars or fleets of drones in the air that are trying to find something or even precision agriculture where you have fleets of these self-driving tractors out on the farm field," said Magnus Egerstedt, UCI dean of engineering and director of the UCI Robot Ecology Lab. "I've always been fascinated by biology. ... I've worked a lot with biologists because I think the way fish school or birds flock, I think that's absolutely mesmerizing."

He said this is relevant to how large teams of robots should coordinate and this connection to biology is what led to the idea of using robots out in nature for the purpose of environmental monitoring.

"The Robot Ecology Lab became the Robot Ecology Lab when we realized that these robots are in essence, living out in nature and they're part of an ecosystem, and we started thinking about them almost like living organisms because they have to harvest energy while they're out there, just like animals have to harvest food," Egerstedt said. "The whole kind of purpose now in the Robot Ecology Lab is



Photos by Jessica Peralta

THE RACCOONBOT hangs suspended between two trees in front of the Engineering Gateway building on the UC Irvine campus.

teams of robots out in nature, trying to figure out what's going on with the environment."

Egerstedt formed the lab four years ago when he came to UCI from the Georgia Institute of Technology, where he spent 20 years and ran a more traditional robotics lab. There are currently 14 students working in the UCI Robot Ecology Lab, a mix of undergraduates, post-graduates and postdoctoral researchers. He said at any given time in the lab, they have undergrads and postgrads from a variety of majors. The postdoctoral researchers already obtained their degrees and now are sharpening their scientific skills for potential future faculty or research positions.

"One of the things that's charming about robotics is it has to be multidisciplinary," Egerstedt said. "It's not mechanical engineering. It's not computer science. It's not electrical engineering. It's all of it."

INSIDE THE LAB

Alex Nguyen is a doctoral student with bachelor's and master's degrees in mechanical engineering who's been working in the lab since 2022.

"We want to develop the theories, develop the algorithms, and then we want to see, OK anything can work in simulation. But does it actually work on real robots, real hardware?" Nguyen said. "And that's where the Robotarium comes in where you just see if what we came up with actually works in real life."

Entering the lab, located inside UCI's Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering Building, visitors can see the Robotarium through a large glass wall before going inside. It's a large, white testing bed taking up most of one room where a fleet of small homogeneous robots — called GRITSBots — can move around. Through

algorithms, the GRITSBots can perform tasks like autonomously moving around each other to avoid collision and also moving in formation. But there are other robots — like the TurtleBot that can be used to carry other robots and the DJI RoboMaster EP that can pick up and place objects.

Nguyen said he is working on a project that explores how different types of robots — heterogenous robots — can do new things that they otherwise could not do individually, by working together.

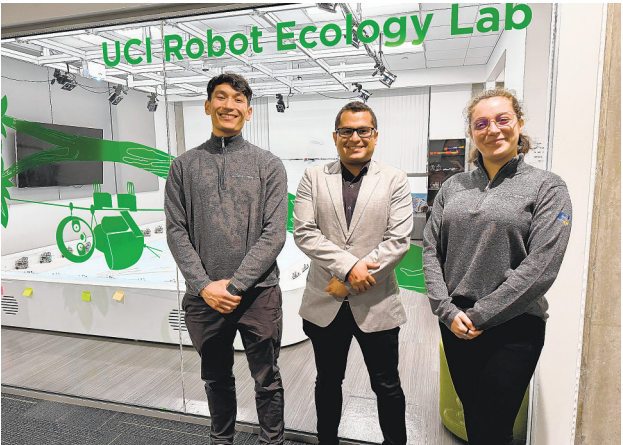
"One project that I can [think] of is the TurtleBot, so having the TurtleBot carry robots across unpassable regions," Nguyen said. "Maybe the robot doesn't have the correct wheels or it can't go across certain terrains. So the TurtleBot has the correct capabilities to be able to ferry the robot across that."

Though the TurtleBot is manufactured by a company outside the lab, the GRITSBots have electronic circuitry designed in-house and contain components from various vendors, which are assembled and programmed by students in the lab.

"Kind of like IKEA furniture, for example," Nguyen said. "We also have these lab-bonding sessions. We just manufacture robots together and just have a good time. All these robots were the work of everyone in the lab."

Doctoral student Riwa Karam obtained her bachelor's of science degree in computer engineering in Lebanon and has been part of the Robot Ecology Lab for two years. She also has a background in software development, systems and machine learning.

"For me, growing up, I was always interested in robots and knowing how to make things move, whether computers or cars or any type of robot. I was always inspired by reading or watching movies," she said.



ALEX NGUYEN, from left, Efraín Méndez and Riwa Karam stand outside the UCI Robot Ecology Lab.

"I started doing my own projects at home. I find it fun."

Karam said the various robots in the lab are there to test the algorithms developed for their research. She said her first project at the lab was based on an algorithm of formation control. The idea was to draw something and the robots could execute what was drawn by forming themselves into that initial drawing.

"So essentially it's like deploying art into a work space where the robots can be deployed," she said.

Though she said now her research is shifting into looking at collaboration between teams of robots.

"How can multiple teams of robots collaborate and how to define that collaboration?" she said.

Her current research has the potential application of putting out wildfires by deploying teams of robots in different regions — with teams sacrificing their own robots by letting them migrate to another team in need, emulating altruistic behavior.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Méndez said the RaccoonBot is currently being tested so it can be fully deployed at Crystal Cove State Park, as part of a partnership with the Crystal Cove Conservancy.

The RaccoonBot's interior is metallic, made of aluminum, stainless steel and copper, for durability. Its exterior is plastic so that it's both lightweight and energy-efficient. It's also equipped with a solar panel and it can transform solar energy into electrical power. At its current location on campus, it moves from one side of the cable to another to find the best position for solar charging. It's also equipped with an antenna near its tail for uploading monitoring data. The robot can self-lock to protect itself when necessary. Since it'll be outside and near the ocean, it must be durable for conditions like wind, rain and saltwater. Part of its testing involved shooting rubber balls at it to make sure it could endure a similar assault. Many of its parts were 3D-printed so it could be customized for the needs of Crystal Cove.

"Crystal Cove State Park is a remarkable place — its habitats are diverse and the problems we face in restoring them and protecting them are real," said Kate Wheeler, president and chief executive of the Crystal Cove Conservancy. "We see the impacts not just of extreme weather and climate change every day on the beaches, but as part of the historic Irvine Ranch, we still have areas in the backcountry — which

connects to a vast swath of open space — that have depleted native seed banks and are overgrown with black mustard and other invasives that need to be restored from overgrazing generations ago. The work students do in our programs — including in our collaboration with Robot Ecology Lab — helps us understand what's happening over time at Crystal Cove so we can better solve those problems."

She said Crystal Cove has been working with UCI for years now through K-12 STEM education programs that put young students in the field, where they can work alongside real researchers, scientists and engineers, gathering data and testing solutions on problems they don't know how to solve yet.

"The school of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and the School of Education have been partnering with us for more than a decade to ensure our K-12 STEM education programs were rooted in real research and ecological restoration and to ensure they're educationally rigorous and aligned with the standards California teachers need to meet," Wheeler said. "As our science programs have grown — to serve more than 10,000 students each year, mostly from Title I schools — and we aimed to integrate engineering more deeply in our programs, it was natural for us to partner with UCI engineering to do that."

She said the Conservancy's aim with these programs is to inspire and equip the future generation of conservationists, scientists and engineers to care for places such as Crystal Cove. She said Egerstedt and the UCI engineering team have helped the Conservancy build engineering into all of their student programs at Crystal Cove.

"And as he'll tell you, robots are magic when it comes to building students' interest and excitement in the work ahead and they show real promise for helping us understand and solve problems by gathering data in places, at times and in ways that people can't," she said. "And have you seen RaccoonBot? He's super cute — so who wouldn't want to bring him into the work?"

Community outreach with organizations like Crystal Cove Conservancy is another facet of the lab's work. Egerstedt said he wants to make sure the Robot Ecology Lab connects with other key institutions in Orange County — like the Ocean Institute in Dana Point, where he recently gave a talk about the lab's work and how to use robots in the ocean. He sees a lot of potential for good with robotics.

"I really believe that we should try to harness technology to do good in the world and to me [connecting robotics to environmental monitoring] is an opportunity to use robotics for something quite compelling," Egerstedt said.

JESSICA PERALTA is a contributor to the Daily Pilot.

ANAHEIM

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speech in the wake of an FBI political corruption probe that first surfaced three years ago.

Todd Ament, the Chamber's former president and chief executive, pleaded guilty to four felonies, including wire fraud, in connection to the investigation.

Ament cooperated with federal agents and surreptitiously recorded former Anaheim Mayor Harry Sidhu wanting to ask for \$1-million from Angels Baseball in political spending in return for negotiating the now-defunct deal to sell Angel Stadium and the land around it to a company controlled by team owner Arte Moreno.

A judge recently sentenced Sidhu to two months in federal prison for related crimes.



James Carbone

GUESTS WATCH Anaheim Mayor Ashleigh Aitken deliver her State of the City address

Slated to close, a new board of directors announced that the Chamber is going to reorganize a day before the speech.

The Chamber also passed a resolution disassociating itself from the Anaheim Chamber of Commerce PAC, a spending vehicle that poured hefty

sums into mayoral races, including in support Sidhu against Aitken in 2018.

"Having a chamber of commerce is a good thing, in general, for cities and it's a way to bring businesses together for the common good," said Tom Tait, who served as Anaheim mayor from 2010 to 2018 and

butted heads politically with the local trade association. "That wasn't was what the Chamber was in Anaheim. It was run by special interests for special interests. Time will tell if this will truly be a fresh start."

The Chamber's political influence in Anaheim even extended to past State of the City addresses that it organized until Tait wrested the event away from it in 2015.

"Ament wanted to control my speech," Tait said. "If he couldn't, he threatened to have Councilwoman Kris Murray give the State of the City."

Aitken mentioned political corruption in her past two State of the City addresses and the city has approved several reforms under her tenure as mayor to increase accountability and oversight, including the hiring of an ethics officer.

But in her latest speech, Aitken preferred to focus on the changes coming to Anaheim, from east to west.

She touted Rebuild Beach Boulevard, an effort to redevelop seedy motels along the highway into housing and retail. The city has spent nearly \$35 million buying, closing and clearing motel properties on Beach.

"In the days ahead, we will tear down the Rainbow Inn, our fourth demolition in four years," she said. "That will clear the way for townhomes and affordable apartments."

Aitken praised popular chains slated to come to the intersection of Beach Boulevard and Lincoln Avenue, which will also be home to the first Dutch Bros location in Anaheim.

"As a city, we are building on a track record with our transformation of the Anaheim Resort, downtown Anaheim, the Platinum Tri-

angle, and we are now leading the way on Beach," she said.

The mayor also praised Little Arabia, an enclave populated by small businesses, as a continuum of the immigrant entrepreneurial spirit that led Germans to start a wine colony in the late 1850s that turned into the modern city Anaheim is today.

She concluded with a Disney-like message on Anaheim's behalf to anyone looking to come to the city and better it by their own ambitions.

"To all looking to build their American Dream, to inspire their imaginations, to find prosperity and success, to embrace the future and to be part of something bigger than ourselves," Aitken said, "well, you've come to the right place."

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OCC Chamber Singers focus on ‘Requiem’ for a theme

BY MATT SZABO

Orange Coast College choral director and conductor Eliza Rubenstein re-members moving to Orange County in the mid-1990s. She went to a recital for renowned violinist Itzhak Perlman at Segerstrom Hall, putting down \$5 for a student ticket to see a childhood hero.

“I was walking up the stairs, and there was this old, white, rich couple walking down the stairs, all fancy,” Rubenstein recalled. “As we passed each other, the woman sort of stopped and looked at me, up and down. She turned to her husband and she said loudly, ‘She’s going to the third tier. That’s where the poorly dressed people sit.’

“I was like, ‘You don’t know it, but you just inspired my entire career.’”

Rubenstein wants her students to know that iconic pieces like Mozart’s Requiem are for them, too, and places like Carnegie Hall in New York are not out of reach.

The OCC Chamber Singers will perform Requiem, accompanied by a full orchestra, on Saturday night, May 10 in the Robert B. Moore Theatre on campus. The show will also feature Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major, performed by OCC music instructor Teresa de Jong-Pombo.

For the Chamber Singers, Saturday’s performance is a precursor to a show at Carnegie Hall on June 24, where they’ll also perform Requiem with the New York City Chamber Orchestra as part of a four-day trip.

Vincente Dang, a bassist, will be making his third trip to the famed concert hall with OCC. The group typically makes the trip every other year, and has performed works by Austrian composer Joseph Haydn in the past.

“It’s so fun, having the experience of being on a different stage with all of

the choir members that you’ve formed a bond with,” Dang said. “Being able to spend more time with them, while still practicing the music at such a prestigious venue, is just so exciting. It’s world-changing.”

Taylor Cox, also a talented pianist, is looking forward to her first performance at the venue. She was born blind and reads music with braille for the show transcribed by Beth Syverson, a faculty member at OCC and Cox’s longtime piano teacher.

Cox, from Huntington Beach, said performance gives her equal footing.

“It’s actually one of the few things that blindness doesn’t affect,” she said. “I have to deal with a lot of things in everyday life. I have to go everywhere with a cane, I can’t drive anywhere, but I feel like performance is where things are truly equal for me. It’s one of the spaces where there’s not a lot of judgment. I’ve had a great experience overall, people have been wonderful on the campus in general, but it’s kind of nice when blindness isn’t the first thing that people notice when someone’s performing.”

Not every member of the OCC Chamber Singers is making the trip to New York, but Rubenstein said the group has been doing plenty of fundraising to make sure as many singers can go as possible.

Mio Romero, an alto, said she is looking forward to both Saturday’s concert and the trip to the East Coast. The group has been locking in on the material since the semester started in February.

“This work is just so massively famous,” Romero said. “My boyfriend heard me practicing, and he was like, ‘Oh my goodness, I’ve heard that before.’ Like, yeah, it’s in this video game.’ I’m like, ‘Yeah, it’s also in this movie, and also in this other thing.’



Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer

ORANGE COAST College Choir Director Eliza Rubenstein leads students through a rehearsal of Mozart’s Requiem on Wednesday.

“It’s really humbling and amazing to be able to be part of it.”

Tickets for Saturday’s show are \$10 for students and \$15 for the general public, and can be purchased at OCC Tickets. Free parking will be available in Lot C.

Rubenstein promises the tickets are well worth the money, adding that the choral department sings all types of music but there’s something powerful about being in the presence of someone like Mozart. As for the Beethoven piece, she called de Jong-Pombo a world-class performer as well as a great teacher of OCC students of all ages and abilities.

“This is as much great music as you will get for your \$15 anywhere in Orange County,” Rubenstein said. “This is an incredible arts bargain.”

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VINCENTE DANG, center, rehearses Mozart’s Requiem on Wednesday.



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IRRELEVANT

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bergasted” to realize that the party has gone on this long.

“When it became 20 years, he really thought that was long,” Salata-Fitch said. “We tried to get [the past Mr. Irrelevants] all back. Some of them were not alive anymore, surprisingly. ... At the 20th year, four of them were already gone, for whatever reason. Twenty years, *it* is really long, and then 25, he thought was long. I mean, 50 is really long.

“My friends know never to ask me to go anywhere the last week of April or anytime in June because I’m planning Irrelevant Week, I’m at Irrelevant Week, or I’m at the draft. The draft always falls on my birthday.”

Mr. Irrelevant is as much a term of endearment as it is a good-natured ribbing, and through the decades, those who have held the title have gained a following in Newport Beach, which serves as home base for the annual Irrelevant Week.

The week’s happenings include the Lowsman Banquet, at which Mr. Irrelevant has been handed a trophy depicting a player fumbling the football. It has also often seen the Newport Beach mayor present a key to the city.

There is usually an evening reserved for a pub crawl. Mr. Irrelevant also receives a surf lesson, drawing attention from the community to see how he takes to the local culture.

Ed Fitch, Melanie’s husband, compared his father-in-law to Don Rickles, the stand-up comedian. While he said he fit in well as a football fan and USC graduate, it took thick skin to be that close to the fun-loving Salata.

“I would try to throw a little bit back at him, and it was no contest,” Fitch said. “You just got to roll with the punches, and I do. I have no problem with that. It was actually a lot of fun, but

I was the butt of a lot of jokes.”

That’s sound advice from a man who spent a lot of time in the presence of the founder of Irrelevant Week, which has a well-earned reputation for roasting and toasting its honorees.

When the first Mr. Irrelevant selection was made, the draft consisted of 17 rounds. It shrunk to a dozen rounds the next year, eight in 1993, and it has been seven rounds since 1994.

There are a handful of Mr. Irrelevants actively playing in the NFL, including Brock Purdy, who was the starting quarterback for the 49ers in Super Bowl LVIII.

Ryan Succop became the first Mr. Irrelevant to hoist the Lombardi Trophy, when he served as the kicker for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in Super Bowl LV.

The odds were stacked against Matt Elliott when he was taken with the final selection (336th overall) by the Washington Redskins in 1992. Elliott, an offensive lineman who also went on to play for the Carolina Panthers, holds the distinction of the final 12th-round selection in NFL history.

It wasn’t until halfway through his fifth year at the University of Michigan that Elliott thought he might have a shot at playing professional football. Every pick of the NFL draft is televised nowadays, but back then, Elliott said he woke up on the final day of the draft and watched the picks come in on the ESPN ticker at the bottom of the screen. The programming that day included motocross and professional wrestling, he recalled.

When he got the call from the Redskins, Elliott got tipped off about what was coming his way. Coach Joe Gibbs and Mike Hagen, the scout who had contacted Elliott in college, had similar advice: “Just go with it.”

Soon, Elliott was out in Southern California, where the festivities included a Runnin’ Gunnin’ Golf Tour-



Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer

MELANIE SALATA-FITCH reflects on 50 years of memorabilia from the annual Mr. Irrelevant celebrations started by her father Paul Salata.

“How lucky are we that Paul Salata 50 years ago decided, ‘It’s irrelevant that you were last. I think it’s relevant that you were drafted, and I’m going to make a big deal about it.’”

— Ryan Hoag

Selected by the then Oakland Raiders in 2003



A PICTURE of the Salata family (Paul lower right).

Irrelevant Week is known for taking requests and trying to accommodate them for their man of the hour. Hoag said he hoped to appear on “Jimmy Kimmel Live!”

“They made it happen,” Hoag said. “They had me as the announcer on the Jimmy Kimmel show. Steve Harvey was one of the guests, and they interviewed me, essentially, alongside Steve Harvey on the Jimmy Kimmel show live. That is pretty special.”

Hoag, who has since made appearances on “The Bachelorette,” and, more recently a game show called “The Floor,” figures he has attended about a dozen Irrelevant Weeks.

Salata used to joke that the Mr. Irrelevant fraternity was a more exclusive club than winners of the Heisman Trophy, given annually to the top player in college football. The Lowsman Trophy is a parody representation of that hardware, which displays a ball carrier posed as delivering a stiff arm.

“Seventh-rounders are always kind of after-thoughts because you have

an 11% chance of making the roster as a seventh-round pick,” Hoag said. “Then there’s us as Mr. Irrelevants. How lucky are we that Paul Salata 50 years ago decided, ‘You know what? It’s irrelevant that you were last. I think it’s relevant that you were drafted, and I’m going to make a big deal about it. Let’s put a party on for you,’ and then the NFL took it and ran with it.”

Those who have gone along with the program have received a lot of goodwill. Elliott said he is still affectionately referred to as “Casper,” a ghostly nickname he was given by Salata for his pale Midwestern complexion on his initial visit.

“They’re going to rib you a little bit, but the focus is you and celebrating you,” Elliott said. “Hoping for your success is what they’re doing. It’s a lot of fun. It will make it even more fun if you just try to have fun. I think it’s one of the neatest things that surrounds the draft.”

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Joan Marinucci Robinson

November 17, 1934 - March 23, 2025

Joan Marinucci Robinson, who was 90, passed away peacefully on March 23, 2025 in her apartment in Reno, Nevada.

She was born in Los Angeles, CA and a longtime resident of Newport Beach, CA. She was the only child of Helen Chambers and Albert Marinucci. She attended Newport Harbor High School (1952), Orange Coast College (1954), Willamette University in Oregon (1955), California State University Long Beach (1956), and a Master’s Degree at National University (1987).

She was a teacher in the Newport Mesa Unified School District for 42 years.

She married John W. Robinson in 1959 and had 3 children. Joan was a loyal friend and a loving mother. She loved the ocean and being outside, her passions were sailing, riding horses, and shared these with her daughters.

She is survived by daughters; Robyn Franz, Cathy Robinson, Jeanne Robinson and grandchildren; Inga Maerz Robinson and Ryan Robinson.



Chase Levon Palanjan

June 14, 1990 - April 24, 2025

Chase Levon Palanjan, beloved son, brother, nephew, cousin, boyfriend, and friend, passed away on April 24, 2025, at the young age of 34. He will be remembered always for his gentle spirit, quiet strength, and the deep love he held for his family, friends, and animals.

Born on June 14, 1990, in Orange County, California, Chase was the cherished son of the late Berj Palanjan and Carolyn Palanjan, and a devoted brother to Jake and Dane. He grew up surrounded by a large and close-knit family whose bond shaped him into the loyal and loving man he became.

A graduate of Newport Harbor High School, Class of 2009, Chase went on to proudly serve in the United States Army, 101st Airborne Division. His time in the Army shaped his character with discipline, resilience, and a strong sense of responsibility that stayed with him throughout his life. Following his service, Chase attended Summit Career College, where he trained as an electrician.

Most recently, Chase worked at Grand Prix Performance, a family business founded by his great-uncle in 1971. The shop held special meaning for Chase, offering a daily connection to his father’s legacy and the Palanjan family values of service, hard work, and family pride.

Chase found peace and joy in the outdoors. He loved fishing, shooting, camping, and golfing — starting with his treasured trips to the lake with his dad and brothers. Those memories remained among the happiest of his life.

Above all, Chase will be remembered for his sweet demeanor, his gentle heart, and his deep love for animals—especially his beloved German Shepherd, Jada, who rarely left his side. He had a calming presence that brought comfort to those around him and a quiet kindness that left a lasting impression on everyone he met.

He is survived by his mother, Carolyn; his brothers, Jake and Dane; his extended family; and many friends who will carry his memory forward with love and compassion.

In lieu of flowers, the family kindly asks that donations be made to the Easy Day Foundation, which was created to ensure every veteran has access to the resources and community necessary to build better lives. To learn more or make a donation, please visit <https://easyday.org>.

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Coach House Concert Hall celebrates 45 years in San Juan Capistrano

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

“You have got to see this first,” said Gary Folgner, owner of the Coach House Concert Hall in San Juan Capistrano, as he walked into the kitchen at the storied music venue.

Inside the small but clean industrial kitchen baked potatoes are wrapped in foil ready to go into the oven and the pilot light glows, a steady flame ready to ignite the burners at a moments notice.

“This place puts out 300 dinners,” Folgner said.

This year the Coach House celebrates 45 years of operation with Folgner at the helm, bringing some of the biggest names in music and comedy to the intimate, 480-seat venue. It’s located just off Camino Capistrano, where a red double-decker bus used to sit as a landmark to direct patrons to the slightly hidden club. The red bus subsequently became the venue’s logo and at 84 years old, Folgner is still involved in the day-to-day operations, providing dinner and a show.

“The menu is very simple and works really well,” Folgner said.

Folgner bought the Coach House in 1980 for \$52,000, operating it as a steakhouse restaurant with live country music on the weekends. Then in 1986 the nearby Golden Bear in Huntington Beach closed. The iconic music venue had been hosting rock ‘n’ roll legends like Janis Joplin, Bob Dylan and the Doors since 1966. The Golden Bear was gone, but not forgotten; plans are underway to revive it in Anaheim at OCVibe. With no where else in Orange County for live rock music to play,



Don Leach | Daily Pilot

FOLGNER ADMIRES a picture of himself and Wille Nelson, one of the many artist portraits on the walls.

Folgner began booking the bands on his stage at the Coach House, thus ushering in a new era of live music for the little steakhouse.

“I got their whole concert schedule and we never stopped from there,” Folgner said.

“PLEASE WELCOME TO THE STAGE ...”

It isn’t easy to find a clear space on any of the walls inside the Coach House. Nearly every inch is lined with framed and autographed photos of famous musicians and comedians who have performed there. Big names like Miles Davis, BB King, Bonnie Raitt, Ray Charles, Pat Benatar, Tom Jones, Johnny Cash, Sinead O’Connor, Dana Carvey and Jerry Seinfeld have all been on the Coach House stage.

On the wall just outside the kitchen door, Folgner points out Norah Jones, Blake Sheldon, David Allen Coe and Debbie Reynolds.

“She played here two days before her daughter died, and that was the end of her performing,” said Folgner, referring to the

death of Carrie Fisher in 2016. Reynolds died the day after Fisher.

At the main entrance Roseanne Barr, Debbie Harry and Chris Isaak are scattered among the sea of framed photos.

“The first time Chris Isaak played here, it was for \$1,500,” Folgner recalls.

The tiny stage once held both Leon Russell, who Folgner was closer friends with, and Willie Nelson for a show. The Everly Brothers, Randy Newman, The Bacon Brothers, Chet Atkins, David Crosby, Etta James, Hank Williams Jr., Merle Haggard, Michael McDonald, Natalie Cole and Peter Frampton are also Coach House alumni.

Folgner credits the venue’s reputation for good hospitality that keeps big names coming back.

“When national acts are on the road, this is their home for the day,” Folgner said. “If you don’t treat them well, they are going to have bad day.”

Folgner also knows how to hire. When Calvin Hardy, a bass player who toured with Ike and Tina Turner and Etta James, came look-



Don Leach | Daily Pilot

OWNER GARY FOLGNER in the main room at the Coach House Concert Hall in San Juan Capistrano. Folgner will celebrate the 45th anniversary of the opening and is still a very much hands-on owner and operator of the storied Orange County music venue.

ing for a job as a dishwasher, Folgner made him director of hospitality. He excelled in his role at the Coach House for 15 years.

“Every band that came in here loved him. We would have agents say, ‘Is Cal still there? Ok, then we’ll continue booking,’” said Blake Folgner, Gary’s nephew and chief operating officer at the venue.

Talent orders dinner right off the menu and gets comfortable at one of the venue’s many dressing rooms, which are themed and located within the labyrinth of the building. Signage directing talent to the stage is everywhere since people are easily lost.

Sometimes there are surprises and acts that aren’t on the bill. In 2020, Ian Hunter & the Rant Band played, then actor and musician Johnny Depp strapped on a guitar to join them.

Blake remembers friends in high school excitedly inviting him to check out a cool new band called The Violent Femmes at a small local venue, not knowing his Uncle owned the place.



Sarah Mosqueda

A SLICE of mud pie from the Coach House Concert Hall in San Juan Capistrano.

Doug Starks, director at the Coach House, remembers when guitar legend Buddy Guy played, getting even closer to the audience by walking around the dining tables.

“This has been a place of where you can count on seeing some of your favorite bands,” Starks said. “Chances are you will leave

See **Concert**, page A10

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forum

MAILBAG

Don't be fooled, Huntington Beach

Don't be fooled by the 'protect our kids' signs covering Huntington Beach. There is no porn in the library, no matter what the City Council is saying. There has never been porn in the library. Our chief of police would arrest the library staff if this were true. All the books have been positively reviewed by accredited sources.

This is about controlling the library book collection. Council wants an one-sided collection reflecting their point of view — only. The 21 politically appointed review committee is just a way for our Council to get its foot in the door. They have yet to explain how refusing to allow residents to vote before Council can privatize our library protects children at all. This is just another attempt to ensure they can control the book collection should Measure A pass.

The Council's fight against Measures A and B is all about limiting access. They will decide what books can and cannot be in the library. Recently, at the City's Easter Egg Hunt, our Council handed out fliers with illustrations taken from young adult books to prove there was "porn" at the library. If our Council really cared about protecting children from seeing these images, why were they handing out these fliers at an event geared for children 10 years and younger? Young adult books are geared for young adults. These books are shelved within the adult section of the library. They are nowhere near the children's section. Young children had more chances of seeing these pictures on the fliers than they ever did while at the library. This is just political theater. All a play.

Council's actions speak louder than signs or words. Don't vote away your rights. Let the parents choose what books are best for their children. Let residents have a say in what happens to their library. Vote "yes" on Measure A and B by June 10.

Barbara Richardson
Huntington Beach

I would like to applaud all the writers to Mailbag on Sunday, April 27 who were concerned about the current Huntington Beach City Council.

The latest horror of seeing their "porn" political campaign poster near elementary schools is the



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

POLITICAL SIGNS posted on coast highway and 17th street in Huntington Beach on Monday.

last straw! I've become irate over the actions against the H.B. Library, which makes absolutely no sense because it is a beautiful facility that is doing a wonderful job for all the children and adults who have enjoyed the library for many years. It would be helpful if the City Council members got back to work on their real job, which should be improving the lives of people who live and work in Huntington Beach.

Veronica Allen
Huntington Beach

Let us begin with one simple fact: It is illegal to have pornographic materials in the library.

Still, signs from Chad Williams line every street in Huntington Beach that tell children about "porn" in big bold red letters. Chad has done more to teach kids about porn in one day than the library has in 50 years. Good Job, Chad!

Let's not forget Pat Burns, holding up a sign written like a first grader would create with crayons that says, "I'm just a kid - Protect Me." Hey Pat, maybe you can help protect kids by getting Chad to stop making signs.

Anyone who thinks that the Huntington Beach City Council cannot possibly do anything more demeaning to our city only has to wait 10 minutes. This Council will find new ways to embarrass Huntington Beach

in an effort to divide its citizens through actions like these signs. They lie to us because we let them.

However, this rises to an entirely new level. Here's the truly hypocritical thing: Our City Council is raving that they want to protect children from material that, by their own judgment, is inappropriate for kids. They claim to protect these kids by exposing every single child to the very indecency they protest. It is wrong, and they are wrong for doing it.

Let me be clear — the fault is not with the City Council; it is with us. Huntington Beach residents voted them in. We have enabled this kind of behavior.

It is time for Huntington Beach to wake up and realize that the Council does not have our best interests at heart — they only represent themselves.

This election is not simply about libraries. It is about our community, our neighborhood, our kids. It is a referendum on how we want our city to be governed — by reason or by fear mongering. Whether you are on the left or the right, it is time to stand up together and put an end to this type of playground bullying. Let us be the grownups in the room.

Vote "yes" on A and B.

Larry Hersh
Huntington Beach

More penguin talk

Like the late songwriter Cole Porter wrote in his 1934 song, "I Get a Kick Out of You," I got a kick from Patrice Apodada's write-up on penguins. Her descriptions of the various personalities and behavior of other animals in her article were nothing less than top-notch reading. For starters on penguins, she declares, "penguins are awesome." When talking about otters, she claims that some people say they are "murderous psychopaths." Pandas have the moniker of, "lazy, arrogant jerks." When describing dolphins which she used to believe they deserved the greatest admiration, now says that some of them treat female dolphins horribly bad. Sea lions whom she calls "Blubber Blobs" show some questionable behavior like chasing surfers out of the water in Newport Beach. Poor sea lion, maybe he had an off day. But getting back to the penguins, she says that they ooze charisma, are birds that can't fly and swim so fast they make Michael Phelps look like a snail trying to swim. And per Patrice, they are lovers, not fighters who stay true to their mates and are great parents. So any penguins who attended law school for penguins who specialize in divorces, would do well to find clients in other

venues not happy with their current spouse. She ends up surmising her take on these flightless birds as "penguin perfection." It's too bad that the bulk of penguins are only found in cold weather. Here in Newport we see ample dolphins and too many sea lions, but never any penguins. Well, who knows, maybe if we have another ice age then there will be penguins on the beach.

Bill Spitalnick
Newport Beach

If Measures A and B fail, extremists get a green light to gut our libraries, censor art and rewrite history.

What's next — scrubbing slavery from textbooks? Silencing Jim Crow? Erasing civil rights? Ignoring veterans who fought abroad and faced hate at home?

This isn't conservative. It's not patriotic. It's un-American.

Dodger fans — be outraged. Trump pulled Jackie Robinson books from military libraries. Books about an American icon who faced racism with courage. When the Dodgers visited the White House, they should've handed him a Jackie jersey and asked: 'Why erase that story?'

History isn't meant to be comfortable. It's meant to be told. Every chapter, every voice — preserved, not purged.

This is not alarmist.

Hitler didn't start with ovens. He started with books. First banned. Then burned. Then, people.

Huntington Beach must not be the first domino. Stand up for truth. For our kids. For our country.

Vote "yes" on Measures A and B. Because if we don't protect history now, we may not have a future worth saving.

Andrew Einhorn
Huntington Beach

"Mommy, what's porn?" my neighbor's little girl asked on her way to school. Her stimulus was the huge posters referring to pornography near her elementary school. There are "porn" posters on public streets all over town thanks to Chad Williams, councilman and youth pastor. It is amazing that someone in these positions doesn't have the moral conscience to know this is plain wrong, if not criminal. It created very uncomfortable moments for parents and most certainly caused children with cellphones to search "porn." Imagine the chatter on the school playground this week. Was this Chad's intent? If not, Chad needs to remove all his posters and apologize to the parents and children of Huntington Beach.

Nora Pedersen
Huntington Beach

NMUSD candidate support

As a Costa Mesa parent, I strongly support Andrea McElroy for the NMUSD School Board.

Andrea is the kind of leader our community needs — someone who represents the values of voters and families like mine. I want common-sense leaders who prioritize academic excellence and school safety, Andrea embodies these qualities.

Recent shifts on the school board have influenced policies in ways that are deeply concerning to many of us. Andrea is the candidate I trust to join like-minded trustees in halting the behind-the-scenes push for progressive policies that don't align with our community's priorities. She will focus on what matters: ensuring our schools are safe and our students are set up for success.

I urge my fellow voters to support Andrea McElroy

See **Mailbag**, page A9

A WORD, PLEASE | JUNE CASAGRANDE

How this simple word can be intimidating

You probably don't read a lot of books written in the 1820s. But if you did, you'd see the word "belie" a lot more. According to Google Ngram Viewer, in the early 1800s, "belie" appeared in books about four times as often as it does now.

Maybe that's why I find the word a little intimidating. I never use it, partly because its definition is confusing, but mostly because its past tense is terrifying.

Today I belie, yesterday I belay? Belaid? Belied? And what about in its -ing form? Beling? Belieing? I never know. That's ironic when you consider how well-versed I am in the past forms of "lie" and "lay." Today I lie, yesterday I lay, in the past I have lain. Today I lay the book on the table, yesterday I laid the book on the table, in the past I have laid the book on the table. I've written about "lie" and "lay" so many times I no longer have to look them up.

But for "belie" ... well, better to just avoid the word altogether than to botch its past tense. At



least, that's how I've been operating.

That changes today, starting with some good news for anyone who's ever struggled to figure out the past form of a verb: Definite answers — not just opinions that amateurs post on the internet — are always handy.

Open any major dictionary, digital or physical, turn to any irregular verb, and the first thing you see after the entry word will tell you how to conjugate it in every form. For example, in Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, after the entry for "begin," you see in bold "began, begun, beginning."

Dictionaries list the simple past tense, "began," first, followed by the past participle, "begun." The easiest way to understand past participles is to think of them as the forms that go with "have": I have begun. For a lot of verbs, there's no difference between the past participle and the regular past tense, which is why you say, "I laid the book on the table" and also "I have laid the book on the table." In those cases, the dictionary lists only the one past form,

"laid," indicating that it serves as both.

For past forms of "belie," Merriam-Webster's lists only "belied." So that's the past tense, "Her gentleness belied her strength," and the past participle, "Her gentleness has belied her strength." Not as difficult as I feared. The progressive participle, "belying," seems pretty easy now that I realize the obvious: that "belie" is more closely related to the "lie" that means to deceive than to the "lie" that means to recline. And we all know how to conjugate that type of lying: Today I lie, yesterday I lied, in the past I have lied, I am lying. "Belie" mirrors that.

The definition of "belie," though, is another matter. It's confusing.

The main definition is to give a false impression of something, as in Merriam's example, "Her gentleness belies her strength." But the secondary definition is "to show something to be false or wrong," as in, "The evidence belies their claims of innocence."

In other words, it can mean to conceal a truth or to reveal a truth.

Some experts disavow this second definition. "The



File Photo

THE EXTREME Deep Field, or XDF, contains about 5,500 galaxies and was assembled by combining images taken by NASA's Hubble Space Telescope over 10 years.

word does not mean 'to disclose or reveal,' as is sometimes thought," writes Garner's Modern American Usage. "That is, some writers wrongly think of it in a sense almost antithetical to sense 1."

It's always unfortunate

when a word has a secondary definition that contradicts its main definition. (Read the full dictionary entry for the word "literally" and you'll see what I mean.) So even though "belie" is easy to put in the past tense, I'll continue not

using it in any tense.

JUNE CASAGRANDE is the author of "The Joy of Syntax: A Simple Guide to All the Grammar You Know You Should Know." She can be reached at JuneTCN@aol.com.

FAITH

Continued from page A1

renditions of “California Dreamin’,” “On The Road Again” and “God Bless America.” That was followed by opening remarks from the council’s executive director, Akbar Hussaini.

He said the world was in the midst of “strange times” and made reference to “extreme ideology both at home and abroad,” the victims of lynchings who “get their homes bulldozed for complaining about it,” and “genocide” that has been described as “essential pesticide.” He clarified in a follow-up interview with the Daily Pilot he was alluding to the persecution of Christians and Muslims in India, the Israeli invasion of Gaza and other conflicts.

“None of this is right,” Hussaini said. “None of this should be treated as normal. What should be normalized is a gathering like this, of people of different faiths working together for the common good.”

Hussaini and Rabbi Marcia Tilchin from the Jewish Collaborative of Orange County acknowledged there were people among the audience who hold starkly differing perspectives on world events, especially those targeting ethnic or religious communities.



Eric Licas

MUSIC DIRECTOR Wes Martin leads the All-American Boys Chorus performing at the Newport Mesa Irvine Interfaith Prayer Breakfast in Newport Beach.

They said it was important for them to come together in forums like the interfaith council to have authentic, respectful, yet difficult discussions.

“I’ve been part of those and this has been, particularly since Oct. 7 with what’s happened in the Middle East, it has been hard,” Tilchin said. “... What I asked of my colleagues is to say that the challenges and the depth and the history of what’s happening in the Middle East and the ge-

opolitics involved, it’s never as simple as it seems on the surface or what gets shared on social media. What I ask of them is that we work together to beautify Orange County, to be good to everybody.”

She was among the many Orange County faith leaders who led the gathering in prayer that morning. During her remarks, she called on people to “uproot bigotry intolerance, misogyny, racism discrimination and violence,” and “welcome

the stranger and the immigrant and to honor the gifts of those who seek refuge and possibility here, as they have since our nation was born.”

Father George Okusi of St. John the Diviner Episcopal in Costa Mesa sought guidance and blessings for the people of California, especially those impacted by wildfires. The president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ Newport Beach stake, Daniel Livingston, proclaimed the

importance of families, adding that “marriage between man and woman is essential to thy eternal plan loyal to each other and loyal to their marital vows.”

“Interfaith is not about us diluting our identity and trying to melt into a homogeneous glob,” Hussain said. “It’s more about keeping our identities, putting that on display and coming together as a mosaic.”

The morning’s keynote speaker was Gaddi Vasquez, former director of the U.S. Peace Corps and Ambassador to Rome. He’s an Orange County native raised by immigrant farmworkers, and recalled how his family of four got by in a one-room trailer “borrowing” electricity from utility poles. The statesman added that he previously worked for Southern California Edison.

“Whatever we lacked in material goods, we sustained ourselves with faith, love and support,” Vasquez said.

“I’m a proud American, but I’m also a survivor whose enduring faith has sustained me through periods of time when the odds seemed insurmountable.”

He described the destruction he witnessed in the aftermath of conflict in Afghanistan and other parts of the world. He has also seen the good that can hap-

pen when people of faith and others respond to the needs of the most vulnerable.

“I witnessed the impactful work of non-government organizations, faith-based organizations, individual efforts, and the application of humanitarian and financial aid that is giving the least among us a fighting chance.”

Newport Beach Mayor Joe Stapleton called Vasquez’s words inspiring, and described the prayer breakfast as a testament to the “power of prayer.” He and fellow council member Robyn Grant said the city was honored to facilitate a moment of unity and a forum between people of diverse viewpoints and backgrounds.

“We all have important places to be and important things to do,” Grant said. “Every single person in this room has family and friends and faith and community and service and work. But to take a little bit of time and reflect on what we can all share with each other is really powerful.”

Costa Mayor John Stevens, Irvine Mayor Larry Agran were also among the elected and appointed officials in attendance Thursday.

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CONCERT

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with a show, a good meal and having made a friend.”

Starks kicked off the anniversary celebration in April as the first performance in the “Coach House Concert Hall Celebratory Concert Series” with his act celebrating the music of Stevie Wonder called “Higher Ground.” A comedian and singer who has toured with the likes of Julio Iglesias, Smokey Robinson, Natalie Cole and Ray Charles, Starks has made it on to Folgner’s wall of fame. His photo up on a beam near the back bar, a true testament to how Coach

House musicians often become family.

“THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE”

Long banquet tables go right up to the stage and the coveted seats up front are distributed on a first-come, first-serve basis. The place seats 480, with 300 of those seats reserved for dining patrons. The earlier reservation are made, the better chance of being right up front, although Blake maintains there isn’t a bad seat in the house.

There are even private rooms upstairs that give you an elevated view of the stage. The rooms are also themed; a hippie room with black light posters and

beaded curtains and a taco room, an homage to the Villa Mexican Restaurant in Dana Point, another business Folgner owned at one time.

“When you rent a private room upstairs, you have a waitress that just serves up here,” Blake said. “We have eight different rooms and each one holds a different quantity of people.”

The intimacy is part of what makes the venue so unique.

“I went to an 11,000-seat venue and had front-row tickets, but the artist is still 100 feet away,” Folgner said.

The furthest seat from the stage at the Coach House is 40 feet.

“THE BAND PLAYS ON”The Coach House is still a steakhouse in some sense, with a simple menu of filet mignon and New York strip steak offered. There is also a “Catch of the Day” and nostalgic appetizers like mozzarella sticks and potato skins.

Folgner is adamant that dinners come out fast, before the show begins so people can fully enjoy the performance.

“We don’t want any serving happening during the show,” said Folgner.

Starks insists diners don’t skip dessert, especially the mud pie made in house with a real Oreo cookie crust, coffee ice cream and enough whipped cream

and chocolate syrup to make a bright red maraschino cherry obligatory.

Patrons can celebrate the 45-year anniversary by coming in for their own slice of mud pie during the “Coach House Concert Hall Celebratory Concert Series,” which is ongoing through the rest of the year. On May 29 the dynamic duo The War and Treaty will take the stage followed by American singer-songwriter Don McLean, best known for his 1971 hit, “American Pie” on June 14. On Oct. 3, Mr. Las Vegas himself, Wayne Newton, will make an appearance. The line up leads up to yet-to-be-announced main event, with the proceeds of the box office

revenue donated to San Juan Capistrano-based therapeutic riding facility, The Shea Center.

There is even talk of bringing the double-decker bus back for the occasion, but other than the restored bus, Folgner said he doesn’t plan to alter the Coach House.

“We are not going to change a whole lot. We are going to try to keep the big name entertainment here,” said Folgner. “That’s what we do.”

For a full concert schedule and tickets visit thecoach-house.com

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