



Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer

**PROJECT MANAGER** Robert Freese walks in a field of purple needle grass and yellow tarplant in Bee Flat Canyon, which was part of an Irvine Ranch Conservancy 10-year restoration project.

## Bee Flat Canyon habitat restored by Irvine Ranch Conservancy

A host of species may return to a canyon decimated by wildfires and hundreds of years of cattle grazing.

**BY BEN BRAZIL**

California gnatcatchers, coastal cactus wren and a host of other species may soon return in droves to an Irvine canyon that had been decimated by wildfires and hundreds of years of cattle grazing.

Bee Flat Canyon now has the habitat these species need after a decadelong restoration project by the Irvine Ranch Conservancy.

"I want to see these native species, be it plant or animal, thrive and endure in the way that they have in Southern California

for centuries," said Robert Freese, a project manager for the Irvine Ranch Conservancy.

"My hope is that they will continue to be here in another 200 to 300 years. It's really important that people see how California used to look before humans got here and altered it so severely."

The 84-acre restoration of the 300-acre Bee Flat Canyon, which is located in OC Parks' Limestone Canyon in Silverado, is the longest and most substantial project ever

See **Canyon**, page R7



**FREES WALKS** on a ridge road above Bee Flat Canyon.



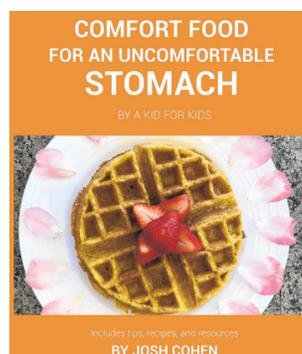
**A "FAREWELL-TO-SPRING"** flower is shown at the bottom of Bee Flat Canyon.

## Teenager donates proceeds from his new cookbook for 'uncomfortable stomachs' to Crohn's & Colitis Foundation



**JOSH COHEN**, left, recently published a cookbook, "Comfort Food for an Uncomfortable Stomach, by a Kid for Kids."

Photos courtesy of Josh Cohen



**BY ADA TSENG**

In 2016, Josh Cohen had traveled from Santa Ana to Coopers-town, N.Y., with his baseball team for a game, but he couldn't play because his stomach hurt so much.

At first, he thought it could be food poisoning, but then the pain lasted for a couple of weeks.

A couple of years later, he ended up in the emergency room for what his doctor initially thought was appendicitis. That's when Cohen, now 17, was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis, an inflammatory bowel disease that causes inflammation and ulcers in the colon.

While the cause is unknown, genetics appears to play a role.

Cohen's mother has a milder case of the disease, a chronic condition which has no cure but can often be managed through medication and diet.

Cohen had never been particularly interested in cooking, but his diagnosis forced him to think more carefully about his food intake and what triggered his flare-ups.

"Seventy percent of our patients will require surgery in their lifetimes," explained Jessica Reiter-Flax, senior manager of fund-raising campaigns and volunteer engagement for the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation. "But a lot of patients have found, by trial and error, the foods that agree with them."

Cohen quickly realized that

dairy and fried foods irritated his stomach, and it helps to keep his diet gluten-free.

"A family friend of ours published a cookbook a while ago, and that gave me the idea of 'What if I made a cookbook geared for other kids who are experiencing what I experienced?'" he said. "And hopefully I can make it a little easier for them."

In July, Cohen self-published "Comfort Food for an Uncomfortable Stomach, by a Kid for Kids," to share what has worked for him.

All proceeds of the book benefit the Orange County Chapter of the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation to fund research and provide resources for its patients. The mis-

See **Cookbook**, page R6

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# Anaheim public schools launch virtual academies

BY VERA CASTANEDA

After moving in-person classrooms to distance learning during a global health emergency in mid-March, some educators couldn't help but wonder how the massive overhaul would affect public education in the long run.

Nearly all school districts distributed loaner laptops. Administrators searched high and low for hot spots when most companies had sold out due to high demand. Colleagues logged into video conferencing apps like Zoom and Microsoft Teams for the first time.

Many students struggled with online teaching. They lacked access to computers and didn't have a study space at home. In some cases, students had family members who were coping with health and financial hardships due to the pandemic. Others thrived with independent online studies.

It didn't take long to see an effect.

A handful of public school districts in Orange County spent the summer preparing to launch online-based schools — not just as a pivot during pandemic times but as mainstay educational institutions for the new school year.

The director of educational technology for Anaheim Elementary School District put together a proposal for a virtual academy in April.

"When we had to go into the school dismissals, we were able to [implement full-time online learning] with a certain level of confidence," said Mary Grace, assistant superintendent of educational services. "It let us know that we can do this, and we should do this."

The Anaheim Elementary Online Academy is for K-6 students to learn from home. Teachers provide live instruction during the same hours as brick-and-mortar schools through video conferencing. Technology is provided for free to students.

The curriculum is the same as the other 23 schools in the district and includes music, art and coding classes. Teachers plan to monitor student progress and work with students in small groups and one-on-one meetings. Educators will have classrooms where they can livestream their lessons out of at Palm Lane Charter School once it is safe to do so.

In conversations with parents



ANAHEIM UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Courtesy of the Anaheim Union High School District

**A DIGITAL RENDERING** of the proposed Cambridge Virtual Academy home base to be built on the district's Polaris High School site.

and guardians, Grace noticed mixed reasons for parents applying to the virtual academy. She said most families want the same self-paced independent learning they saw their children thrive in rather than be concerned over sending them to school without an available vaccine for COVID-19.

"We have a number of our employees with children that noticed during school dismissal, their child was producing more work than they were when they were in the seat," Grace said.

Others want the scheduling and attendance flexibility offered at private and parochial schools where students could, for example, play travel baseball.

As of late July, 260 students had enrolled in the academy.

When asked if the online school is for a specific type of learner, Grace said the child should be a motivated, self-paced student who will have a family to

support them.

Anaheim Union High School District, which is launching the Cambridge Virtual Academy for grades seven to 12, asks for similar qualities in their students.

John Bautista, the spokesperson for the district, said self-motivated, persistent and individual learners with time management skills make ideal students.

"Now everybody is online. But this is very specific to this academy because it is going to be 100% online from the beginning, and we obviously want our students to be successful, so every student needs to have these four qualities," Bautista said.

The academy is staffing teachers who have experience teaching online through the district's e-learning program and will use an A-G certified curriculum, including honors and Advanced Placement courses. Staff plan to have an emphasis on socioemotional

learning and a keystone project that could include a set of experiences like community or civic engagement.

Students would also participate in mentorship programs, which include an internship component.

Bautista taught for 17 years and spent five of those years as an online teacher with a hybrid schedule creating his own online curriculum.

"We already had systems in place to create [the academy] because we had a really great robust learning program throughout our district," Bautista said. "[The pandemic] just kind of pushed us to launch a little bit faster because there was a need for it. At the time, we weren't sure whether we were going to come back full seat or hybrid."

The academy received 994 applications but had only 350 slots available.

Regardless of whether a stu-

dent is enrolled in an online academy, both Anaheim school districts will start the new school year with distance learning.

A few days after the Orange County Board of Education issued a controversial recommendation in July, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced that schools located counties on the state's monitoring list may not physically open for in-person classes until the county has come off the list for 14 days.

The list includes Orange County, with Anaheim making the mark as one of the high-risk cities in the county.

Other districts such as Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified and Irvine Unified are also launching virtual academies while Saddleback Valley Unified introduced virtual academies for K-12 students in the 2017-18 school year.

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# YMCA of O.C. offers child care to help school families

BY SARA CARDINE

As students brace for another year of distance learning and parents ponder the complications of balancing workplace demands with kids learning at home, YMCA of Orange County has announced it will offer in-person child care and homework support to K-8 students.

Students may be enrolled in full- or part-time Y programs operating at one of more than 40 school sites that have been retooled to accommodate socially distanced enrichment, homework support, clubs and activities in the upcoming academic year.

Anna Romiti, vice president of marketing for YMCA of Orange County, said the organization has continued to adapt its operations in response to state and county closures throughout the coronavirus pandemic, most recently moving fitness equipment and classes outdoors.

"When COVID-19 struck, we immediately pivoted our services," she said, describing Y locations offering child care to essential frontline workers and later expanding to summer day camps with safety measures in place. "We know caregivers need support, so as long as we've been allowed as an essential service to remain open, we've remained open."

Seeing the vital need for child care options, especially for single-parent households and homes where both parents are working, organizers have developed a protocol for bringing kids onto still-closed school campuses during the regular hours of 6:45 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays.

Of course, there are some new rules to observe.

Parents and children must wear facial coverings during check-in, and guardians may no longer visit classrooms. Kids must



Courtesy of YMCA of Orange County

**CHILDREN SOCIALLY** distance while playing at a YMCA of Orange County summer day camp.

be distanced and will be kept in smaller groups of about 10 to 14 participants, and surfaces will be regularly disinfected.

New games, such as noodle tag, will reinforce distancing, and instructors will provide distance-learning support throughout the day. Parents must confirm health statements when dropping off children for the day, and children exhibiting any signs of illness will not be accepted.

Romiti said the precautions and guidelines are designed to ensure kids get the interaction they need in while minimizing the risk of exposure.

"We're a safe place for children to come and do distance learning," she said. "They're also getting other benefits — they're getting outdoor playtime and they're getting other activities that are curriculum-based."

Staci Costello works as a quality assurance specialist with the Y, auditing school programs and making sure protocol and training are properly implemented. But as a mother of two young sons, aged 6 and 7, she admits she and her husband, like many others, have been stretched thin during the pandemic.

"It was a huge struggle for him to have a work meeting when the kids had to be on Zoom with their teachers at different times,"

Costello said of her husband's adventures in distance learning.

Now her sons, typically enrolled in YMCA child care before and after school, are participating in a full day of programming and enrichment that will give her and her husband time to work without sacrificing their children's learning or social needs.

"Thank goodness there are child care programs like the Y that can do this," Costello said. "There are a lot of parents going back to work right now, and they're going to need help."

YMCA of Orange County chief executive Jeff McBride said the program was designed to provide a safe option for families who struggled when schools transitioned online in March and will need support in the academic year ahead.

"This new format of schooling will have a major impact on families, especially working families, and we want them to know that if and when they need support and/or child care, we are here to help them meet that need," he said in a statement last month. "Families should not have to choose between their children's development and education and parental livelihoods and household health."

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Don Leach | Staff Photographer

**FROM LEFT**, Orange County Supervisor Donald Wagner, Irvine Councilman Michael Carroll, Mayor Christina Shea, Councilwoman Farrah Khan, Councilwoman Melissa Fox and Mark Asturias of the Irvine Land Trust gather for a ceremonial ground-breaking for an affordable housing development. The Salerno property is slated to open in March 2021.

## Thousands interested in Irvine affordable housing complex

BY BEN BRAZIL

More than 6,800 people recently signed up to be considered for an affordable housing complex in Irvine, indicating a grave need for more units in Orange County as more people are struggling financially due to the pandemic economy.

The prospective residents, mostly from Southern California, are seeking one of the 80 units of the Salerno property, located at Nightmist and Sand Canyon Avenue, a few blocks from the Great Park and 5 Freeway.

"There is not enough affordable housing in the state of California, let alone the country," said Mark Asturias, executive director of the Irvine Community Land Trust. "The pandemic is causing a lot of people to lose their housing and they are looking for more affordable options."

The property has been in development for years, spearheaded by the Irvine Community Land Trust, affordable housing provider and owner of the property.

Salerno is the first large-scale, multifamily development project the trust

has broken ground on since spinning off from the city as a private nonprofit in 2017.

The complex was originally slated to open in December, but has been rescheduled to March 2021 due to construction delays from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Asturias said the 6,818 was by far the most people who have ever signed up for one of the trust's complexes.

"This was an incredible show of interest that highlights just how strong the demand is for affordable housing in Irvine and all of California," Asturias said.

The trust currently oversees three affordable housing complexes, with about 350 units. Salerno will be the trust's fourth affordable housing location.

The trust will break ground on a housing complex for moderate-income families later this year called Native Spring.

There are currently about 1,000 affordable housing units in development in Irvine. Irvine has about 4,600 affordable housing units.

Based on a marketing requirement from the city,

the trust advertised the complex from May to mid-July. An interest list was generated randomly by a computer, assigning a number to each name.

The trust will now begin contacting people on the list to make sure they fit the requirements.

Of the total units, 35 will be available for individuals earning less than 30% of the area's median household income, which was \$95,573 in 2017. That will include 15 units for veterans, 10 for the developmentally disabled and 10 for families at risk of homelessness.

Another 34 units will be available for individuals earning less than half the area's median income, and 10 will be available for those earning less than 80%.

The property will include one-, two- and three-bedroom units, each with their own private balcony or patio, as well as a washer and dryer. Monthly rent will be as low as \$550 for a one-bedroom, \$625 for a two-bedroom and \$695 for a three-bedroom.

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# Pandemic economy inspires cousins to start 'side hustle'

The pair began delivering fresh durian directly to customers, once they realized there was a demand in O.C.

BY ADA TSENG

In 2018, after graduating from Cal State Long Beach, Chris Meechukant and his older brother Andy took over Bangkok Taste restaurant in Santa Ana.

Their parents Tammy and Paul, first-generation Thai immigrants, started Bangkok Taste in 2001, and in the last couple of years, the sons had worked hard to grow the family restaurant. But when the pandemic hit, they had to furlough most of their workers and limit their services to takeout.

Up in San Francisco, their cousin Tou Meechukant was a bartender, dreaming of creating his own signature products from Thailand to use while mixing cocktails. For the last three years, he had been developing unique liquor-strength syrups, including a lotus syrup, and in January, he debuted them at a food show.

It was popular enough that he had gotten preorders from six states and was about to deliver. But the shipment came in mid-March, just as bars shut down.

"It was bad timing," Tou said. "So I had to pivot. I had all these connections with suppliers in Thailand. And with nightclubs and restaurants closed, I had to think about what I could provide to customers through direct sales. What can't people get during the pandemic, because they can't go out?"

Tou asked Chris to help him with his new import business, Atipat Trading Co. At first, Tou



Raul Roa | Staff Photographer

AS RESTAURANTS and bars shut down in March, Chris, pictured, and Tou Meechukant looked for ways to get beloved Thai products, including \$35 boxes of fresh durian, directly into the hands of customers.

started selling Thai boat noodle meal kits, but soon he began to believe there was an untapped demand for durian in the U.S.

In 2019, Thailand became the sixth largest exporter of fruits, according to the National New Bureau of Thailand. Though durians are thought to originate in Borneo and Sumatra, Thailand recently overtook Malaysia as the biggest exporter of durian, with an estimated \$817 million USD in value sold mostly to China and countries in Southeast Asia.

Chris was initially skeptical. He remembered going back to Thailand with his parents when he was a kid and trying durian for the first time at a farm.

"It was mushy, and it smelled really weird," he said of the pulpy yellow pods inside the spiky outer shell. "But once you get past the smell and you eat it, it tastes sweet and I liked it."

Chris compared durian to stinky tofu, the fermented Taiwanese night market snack that also inspires a passionate follow-

ing. He laughed as he referred to viral videos showing cats reacting to durian's strong, unmistakable odor that scientists recently attributed to the biosynthesis of volatile sulfur compounds.

But in July, Chris posted on the Asian Hustle Network Facebook group, explaining that he had started "a small side hustle" delivering fresh durian to Orange County.

"The smell is mild compared to the ones you'd find in the mar-

ket," he wrote. "Why is this? Because it isn't overly ripe and the fruits have never been frozen, therefore SUPER FRESH!"

He was immediately flooded with comments and orders.

"I didn't believe it until I saw it," he said of the demand.

Bonnie Sintuvat Lee of Buena Park ordered a box for her mother right away.

"Everyone from Thailand from my mom's generation is completely obsessed with durian," she said, explaining that her immigrant mother Mimi Sintuvat loves the type of durian grown in Thailand called monthong, which translates to "golden pillow."

"But she's from a generation where she doesn't want to spend money, right? So she settles for the cheaper ones," Bonnie said. "It may not be as good as she remembers, but she'll settle for it."

Durian is known for being more expensive than other fruits. Those who love it consider it a delicacy. Tou's brand, called Uncle Tou's, costs \$35 for a box of two to three pods, depending on the net weight.

But in the U.S., if you buy durian from an Asian supermarket, often it's frozen or thawed, so the texture is different, explain the cousins. And for an untrained eye, it can be gamble to pick a good one.

The pandemic had prevented the Sintuvat family from taking a trip back to Thailand this summer, so Bonnie wanted to bring Thailand to her mom. Mimi is the type that's constantly taking care of — and worrying about — her kids and grandkids, Bonnie said.

"For me as her daughter, I just

See **Cousins**, page R6

# Motion against Irvine mayor withdrawn as 1st Amendment suit continues

BY BEN BRAZIL

Irvine Mayor Christina Shea has made her Facebook profile private in response to a lawsuit launched by an Irvine resident who she allegedly blocked for posting comments in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The firm representing resident Lamar West re-

cently withdrew a motion for a preliminary injunction calling for Shea to unblock him and others who posted similar sentiments in support of the movement.

It is still pursuing a lawsuit against Shea that alleges she violated West's 1st Amendment rights by blocking his ability to engage in open discussion during a critical period of debate in the country re-

garding police brutality and racism.

The lawsuit, which is seeking damages, contends that Shea used her Facebook page as a public forum.

Shea claimed in a text message this week that the lawsuit is a "political maneuver" by former Irvine mayor Larry Agran, a political opponent of Shea's who recently announced his

candidacy for City Council in the coming November election.

"They basically vacated their attack on me," Shea said over the phone. "The case has basically been dismissed based on they pulled away from their injunction. They agreed to not move forward, and all we have dealing with right now is the case for damages. We are working on that right now."

Monique Alarcon, an attorney with the firm representing West — Baum, Hedlund, Aristei and Goldman — said Shea partially resolved the issue when she made her profile private.

"Mr. West's lawsuit against Mayor Shea is still ongoing," Alarcon said. "After we filed our motion for a preliminary injunction, Mayor Shea made her Facebook profile that is in dispute completely private and accessible to only her friends and not the general public, in response to our litigation. As a result, we withdrew our motion, but we are still pursuing Mr. West's claims for violations of his 1st Amendment rights."

Shea's private page now says underneath her name "Irvine resident This is not a government page."

Shea has a separate public Facebook profile where she posts city-related information.

West's attorneys are awaiting a response from Shea's lawyers.

Shea first came under fire in early June for deleting



Courtesy of the city of Irvine

IRVINE MAYOR Christina Shea is facing a lawsuit for allegedly violating a resident's 1st Amendment rights.

and blocking comments supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement on her Facebook profile.

At the time, she contended that the profile page was for personal use, and that she had a separate Facebook profile for public dialogue. Public officials are legally allowed to hold private social media accounts.

However, Shea posted similar statements on both pages during the Black Lives Matter protests in June, and the complaint says that Shea has used her profile "since its inception ... to disseminate information regarding mayoral and city council activities ... all with greater frequency than her [official] page."

Shea's comments in June — made amid nationwide protests that were sparked after the death of George Floyd — were strongly in

support of her police department and critical of protesters. They provoked heated discussion on her page.

"We have been named one of the Safest Cities in America for 15 years in a row and I will not agree to reduce our public safety funding especially after seeing the violence we have endured as a nation this past week. If you are coming into Irvine to promote an agenda, and protest for lesser public safety protection, best you turn around and find another city to compromise," Shea wrote on her Facebook page on June 3, according to the complaint.

Many responded critically to Shea's post, including West, a Black man.

"Like other educated people have mentioned, it's OK for you to support the movement and not defund the police but you don't want to do either. I can hear the racist ancestors of yours in this post, and it's sickening. Enjoy your position while it [lasts]," West wrote, according to the complaint.

West was blocked soon after the post.

Shea has received criticism from the Thurgood Marshall Bar Assn., Orange County's only Black bar association, the Knight First Amendment Institute and the ACLU of Southern California for her actions on Facebook.

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# 'We've never seen such a demand in our history': Domestic violence resource centers see rise in calls

BY VERA CASTANEDA

Safer-at-home orders had a distorted meaning for those whose homes weren't safe even in pre-pandemic times.

Hotlines started ringing at a higher rate in March compared to previous years. People in abusive homes were calling for shelter, counseling, legal services and safety plans.

Orange County-based domestic violence resource centers, which are classified as an essential service, stepped up outreach and began to deliver services remotely. But some staff said the demand is greater than the resources available, especially for housing.

Waiting lists were created when rental assistance funds were tapped out and shelters were full with no vacancies expected any time soon. Although the centers implemented alternative solutions to meet high demand, some have also turned away people who are mounting debt from back-pay rent or are ready to flee abusive homes.

Maricela Rios-Faust, CEO of Human Options, said calls doubled primarily for legal advocacy such as visitation custody, and there was a 100% increase in requests for food and other basic needs during the first two weeks of coronavirus-related shutdowns. They also saw a 50% increase in requests for parenting classes and the personal empowerment program, she said.

Women's Transitional Living Center (WTL) received a 70% increase in the number of callers compared to last year at the same time.

"Some want to come to shelter, but many of those calls were people feeling an increased level of anxiety and fear. They just need help coping with that feeling," said Mark Lee, CEO of WTL.

Thyda Duong, program development director of Interval House, said their calls for housing services tripled since last year. At one point, staff were getting calls and emails for housing assistance every five minutes.

"Across the board, we are overwhelmed with requests. We've never seen such a demand in our history. We've been around for over 40 years, and this is really unprecedented," Duong said.



Courtesy of Human Options

**ONE OF HUMAN OPTIONS'** workshops on identifying healthy and unhealthy relationship behavior, which went virtual as the center shut down locations amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Laura's House Clinical Coordinator Hadil Penalvert, said the hotline used to get about 60 calls a week, and the number increased to 100 a day. Most of the calls are people looking for shelter or to develop a safety plan.

Penalvert attributes the influx of calls to spending more time at home with abusive partners.

"Before COVID, the survivor would be at work or be able to pass a couple of hours away from their partner," Penalvert said. "There was a little bit more freedom. You don't really have ways to see other people now. You can be completely isolated."

She explained isolation is a key tactic in maintaining control over victims.

Added stressors such as losing jobs, managing work from home while taking care of kids and an increase in substance abuse are common factors that heighten violence and abuse.

Lee refers to this time period as a "pressure cooker situation" but is careful to note stress doesn't cause domestic violence.

"The stresses aren't any different from anybody else who's going through this time period," Lee said. "What's different about those in abusive situations is that any one of those stressors can trigger violence or abusive behavior."

He added, "From the perspective of the person that's causing the harm, there is a need to have control that they would only have from, for example, work. Maybe they lost their job and no longer have control over finances and they are looking for something else in their lives to control. It might be their partner or kids."

The intensity of cases increased as well. "In one week, [Human Options] brought in five families. Three families had strangulation in their history, and it had happened during the stay-at-home orders, which is a fairly high percentage of the cases," Rios-Faust said.

**SHELTER AND HOUSING ASSISTANCE**  
All four centers offer emergency and short-term shelter in confidential locations. They also have varying resources to find permanent housing.

Penalvert describes the experience of seeking shelter as "having to start over again," since those who are participating in the shelter program can't return to previous jobs, schools or neighborhoods. To prevent location tracking, they can't use digital devices. During the program, they are allowed one call per day from a blocked number.

Laura's House implemented social distancing,

limiting shared rooms and interactions in common areas.

Although most of Human Options' shelters have individual rooms with a private bathroom, some living situations were set up with a shared bathroom. The center decided to not use shared space and negotiated a deal with a local hotel to supplement the rooms they lost due to COVID-19 precautions.

Interval House also extended its hotel program because its shelters are at full capacity.

"Both domestic violence victims and survivors, who we've helped before [and] were taking their first steps toward financial stability, reach back out to us for assistance with housing because of the impacts of COVID-19 and unemployment," Duong said. "We've also seen community members at large who aren't experiencing domestic violence reach out."

Interval House provides rental assistance to resi-

dents in need. Although they've offered the program for over 25 years, they've expanded it over the last decade. The center began administering a homeless prevention program during the previous economic recession in 2008.

Duong said people who are requesting rent assistance don't have savings or the ability to pay back-rent so they are accumulating bigger debt.

"At some point we had to just put people on waiting lists for rental assistance because we simply ran out of funding," Duong said. "We're working really hard to turn over every rock to see what is available in terms of funding and resources so that we're able to continue to help people."

WTL also created a waiting list for shelter spaces.

Typically, families or individuals graduate from the shelter program and get accepted into a housing program or find a roommate to move out on their own. It

allows for bed spaces to become available. But a lot of housing programs are not accepting new clients.

"Because of a pandemic, there's been a huge fault in these other housing programs or live-in situations that our families and individuals would actually go into," Lee said. "They have nowhere else to go, so we are having them stay with us for a longer period of time. What's happening is when we get callers who are ready to flee from their domestic violence situation, we are at a position where we can't accept them because our shelters are full."

Motels serve as a temporary extension of the shelter program. Typically, the center uses motels for a couple of nights as the clients wait for short-term housing spaces to become available.

Lee said recently families have stayed in motels for 30 days or more. One family is still waiting for shelter to become available after staying at a motel for 90 days.

## REMOTE SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

Therapy, support groups, legal services and educational programs have transitioned to be conducted through phone or internet for all of the centers, but it can come with risks.

"It has been a little challenging. A lot of the time, there's technology abuse. Their phones or email are being tracked," Penalvert said.

Part of teletherapy and online support group safety measures include making sure clients are alone in a room or alternative space.

"We have clients that do therapy from their parked cars, go to a family member's house or take a walk outdoors," Penalvert said.

Human Options kept some of their offices partially open to half of staff while completely shutting down to go remote for other locations, such as Minnie

See **Centers**, page R6

## TimesOC

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## COUSINS

Continued from page R4

want to give her the best thing," she said. "Thirty-five dollars might be a lot to pay for a fruit, but it's not a lot to pay for a gift for my mother to make her happy."

Mimi likes the ones that are more yellow, ripe and sweet, said Bonnie.

Chris and Tou said many of their customers prefer the ones that are in the fleeting stage of durian where it's not quite young but not quite ripe.

"That's when the skin is a little dry and crispy, so you have a little crack and pop when you bite into it," Chris said.

"It's hard to come by, but that's what we try to get for our customers," Tou said.

It's taken a lot of trial and error to map out the perfect timing to get their customers the freshest batches of fruit.

The durians are cracked at the farms, boxed up and shipped to San Francisco International Airport within 48 hours, after heavy negotiation with the farmers to only choose the best quality fruits that are available at the particular time in the season.

The Meechukants have learned that custom border patrol agricultural specialists only inspect incoming items a couple of times a day, so if it comes in the late afternoon, it's possible the package will sit there for too long for the gel ice packs to keep the fruit fresh.

Because of this, Tou and Chris are constantly at the airport in the early hours of morning, racing with the clock. When a ship-



**BONNIE SINTUVAT LEE** bought her mother Mimi, pictured, a box of durian from the Meechukants. Mimi Sintuvat's favorite type is the monthong (golden pillow).

Courtesy of Bonnie Sintuvat Lee

ment for Orange County comes in to San Francisco International Airport, Tou picks it up, replaces the old gel ice packs with new ones and immediately drives it over to the next airline so Chris can pick the shipment up from John Wayne Airport in Santa Ana within a few hours.

And then Chris delivers them himself to those who have preordered in Orange County.

Since he started about a month ago, Chris has sold about 50 boxes a week, most often to customers who live in Little Saigon.

Tou also offers delivery across the nation, but he recommends customers pick up the cargo directly at the airport so they can control the timing.

So far, they've specialized in monthongs: from Monthong Chanthaburi (grown in east Thailand), Monthong Phu Kao Fai (grown in volcanic soil in Sri Saket in the northeast), Monthong Khiriwong

(from the south) and Monthong Betong (from near the border of Thailand and Malaysia).

The connoisseurs take their durian really seriously, Tou said. They will pay in order to get the best quality, quickly, especially when they are craving it.

What Chris is often delivering is childhood memories, Bonnie said.

The Uncle Tou's plastic boxes feature a cartoon rendition of Tou wearing his signature fedora and a durian on top of the hat.

"It's so funny, I just ordered my mom another box of two," she said. "She finished the first one in seconds. And she resisted and only ate about one third of the second piece so she could save the rest for the next day. But I know in the morning, when she wakes up, that'll be the first thing she eats."

Chris and Tou admit they aren't as passionate about durian as their customers.

Calling himself a "bad

Thai," Tou said that the first time he transported 27 boxes of durian in his car, he had to pull over and roll down the window because he felt nauseated from the smell.

But they all understand its significance in their culture.

"The gateway to liking durian is eating durian chips," Bonnie said. "My mom normally comes back from Thailand with durian chips. They're 10 times better than kettle chips, they're made with durian and taste like potato chips but more but-tery."

Similarly, while a large bag of potato chips might usually go for a few dollars, an equivalent-sized bag of durian chips could also cost the equivalent of \$35.

"The difference between durian and durian chips is that there's no smell," she said. "So you just taste the flavor. We'll go over to my mom's house and slowly eat it. Try not to eat all of it at once."

So Bonnie appreciates the Meechukants' side hustle.

"This is a new generation that's trying to think of different ways to bring money in [during COVID]," she said. "And they decided to sell durian because it makes people like my mom happy."

Orange County customers can order durian directly from Chris Meechukant by sending him a direct message on his Facebook page: facebook.com/cmeechukant. Those outside of O.C. can message Tou at facebook.com/AtipatUSA.

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## CENTERS

Continued from page R5

Street Family Resource Center in Santa Ana. They anticipated access to the centers would become less visible, so they reverse-called all clients letting them know services, including telehealth, would be available.

Rios-Faust said Human Options lost entry points of connection like teachers and school administrators who would notice students living in abusive homes or access to seniors, who are historically connected to services through home visits.

They've enlisted teens, who participate in the ambassador program, to write letters to seniors.

"Some of the seniors wrote back and that was really new for us — connecting multiple generations. Our goal is to make sure that we're addressing relationship violence across the lifespan," Rios-Faust said.

The ambassador program is a 10-week training for high-school-age students to become peer-to-peer mentors, and it was created to address dating abuse among teens. This year, a small group met over Zoom to complete their cohort and a service-learning project.

"At times it was a little bit awkward because we had never met, but I found some wonderful things about it," said Marissa Presley, prevention educator at Human Options. "In the past, we would do it at different high schools but only the youth from the same high school would participate. Now I have youth

from all different high schools in Orange County."

## FINANCIAL HITS TO AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE

The four centers are nonprofits who rely on fundraising and private donors. They've taken a financial hit and are determined to find new ways to make up for losses.

WTLC's reserves could last six months without any revenue. WTLC dipped into a small portion of its reserves to cover unexpected expenses related to the pandemic.

"We're very hopeful that we won't get to the point where we will use up all the reserve amount where then we will have to close our doors," Lee said.

Human Options also had unexpected expenses to cover masks, cleaning supplies and technology upgrades for staff members to work remotely in a safe location.

The center's largest gala, typically held in May, generates \$500,000.

"Not having the event meant we need to try to generate that revenue," Rios-Faust said.

"We reached out to several donors [community stakeholders and foundations] to ask whether they would consider still supporting Human Options during this time. Fortunately many of them did. We also benefited from the resilience fund of the Orange County Community Foundation.

"We are definitely seeing a rise in domestic violence and really need to provide services as an ongoing essential service."

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## Costa Mesa's Taco Maria reopened after brief coronavirus closure

BY HILLARY DAVIS

One of Orange County's only Michelin-starred restaurants, Taco Maria, temporarily closed as a COVID-19-related precaution.

The upscale Mexican eatery in Costa Mesa's SOCO Collection posted to social media on July 30 that it would close while it awaited a staff member's COVID-19 test results; it updated the post to say that it is "COVID-19 free and safe" and resumed takeout service on Wednesday.

Taco Maria has closed before during the pandemic, choosing in late

March to temporarily cease all operations as a health precaution.

In addition to earning a Michelin star in 2019 — Hana re, also in Costa Mesa, was the only other Orange County restaurant to get on the exclusive list last year — Taco Maria came in third on the Los Angeles Times' 101 Best Restaurants list for 2019 and was named that publication's top restaurant in 2018.

Restaurants around Orange County have gone off and back online in recent weeks as workers come down with suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19.

In another recent case, Farmhouse at Roger's Gardens in Newport Beach closed for two days recently after a member of the kitchen staff tested positive for the virus, according to a post to the restaurant's Instagram.

The "farm-to-fork" restaurant, which has since reopened for lunchtime patio dining and resumed takeout-only for dinner, deep-cleaned and had four additional employees go into quarantine and get tested. It plans to resume dine-in dinner service shortly.

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Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

TACO MARIA at the OC Mix closed while waiting for an employee's coronavirus test results.

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## COOKBOOK

Continued from page R1

sion is to find a cure and to provide quality of life for kids and adults with the autoimmune disease.

Reiter-Flax said Cohen first reached out to her earlier this year leading up to the foundation's Take Steps fundraiser in June.

Usually, they host an annual walk to fundraise, but this year, they had to do it all virtually. Cohen was one of their top fundraisers, raising \$1,600 despite the pandemic.

Reiter-Flax said Cohen had already done all the work and self-published his cookbook himself before reaching out to tell her that he'd like the proceeds to go to the foundation.

"We're so happy he chose us," she said. "He's just a really great kid. He just wants to help people, he takes initiative, and he's so business-savvy for his age."

The cover of the book is Cohen's favorite recipe: waffles made with almond flour.

"We'd triple the recipe, bag it, and my whole family would eat it," Cohen said, of the "Lisa's Waffles" recipe, named after his mother.

Breakfast food is his favorite, and his cookbook also includes recipes for banana bread and pumpkin chocolate chip muffins.

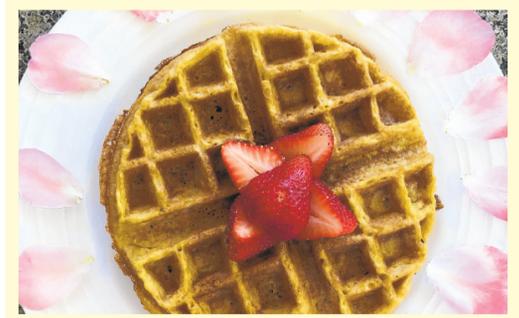
Other categories include entrees like steak and marinade made with coconut aminos, pineapple juice, sesame oil, garlic, honey, fish sauce and ginger; sides like homemade hummus; and treats including a peanut butter shake and chocolate almond butter bars.

There are also family recipes like "Pearl's Thanksgiving Raspberry Cranberry Sauce," named after his grandmother.

In addition to 18 recipes, Cohen gives tips and healthy food brand recommendations, and he penned a dedication to his mother as an introduction to the book. There, he jokes about a holiday a decade ago, where his mom gifted him a KitchenAid mixing bowl, while his older brother got a Star Wars light saber.

He thought it was "lame" at the time, but "I would later understand the importance of cooking and the value of this very thoughtful gift that has lasted for years, used hundreds of times, while the light saber my brother received was broken in a couple weeks," he wrote.

He wants to teach people how he has been able to continue his enjoyment of food despite his limitations, with some simple adjust-



Courtesy of Josh Cohen

"LISA'S WAFFLES" is Josh Cohen's favorite recipe in his cookbook "Comfort Food For An Uncomfortable Stomach, By a Kid for Kids," which he wrote after a ulcerative colitis diagnosis forced him to experiment with his diet to manage his condition.

### Lisa's Waffles

Why waffles? These waffles are like no other. My entire family loves these. They taste great both plain or drizzled with maple syrup. My mom and I make these at least once a week to make sure our family has a steady supply. These waffles not only taste great but they will make you feel great. Our waffles use Almond flour which is nutrient dense flour, which is good for your body and is low on the glycemic index.

Unlike ordinary carbohydrates made with all purpose flour, after eating these I feel an influx of energy and sustain for a long amount of time. Normally when I eat cereal or other simple carbohydrates, that are high on the glycemic index, my body feels tired and I start getting headaches.

However this never happens with these amazing almond flour waffles that my whole family enjoys. You will not be disappointed when you try this fabulous recipe for yourself.

One recipe makes 6-8 waffles (At our house we normally triple the recipe and put the extra in freezer bags to be toasted throughout the week).

#### INGREDIENTS:

- 1½ cups almond flour
- ½ cup tapioca flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- pinch of salt
- 3 tablespoons coconut sugar

- 3 large eggs
- 3 tablespoons virgin coconut oil, warmed to liquid state
- 1 cup Califia coconut almond milk
- 1 teaspoon almond extract
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- Canola or coconut oil spray

#### DIRECTIONS:

**1** Preheat your regular or belgium waffle maker.

**2** Make the waffle batter: Whisk together the dry ingredients in a medium bowl. In a separate bowl, whisk together the wet ingredients. Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and thoroughly whisk together.

**3** Rest the batter: Allow the mixture to sit for 5 minutes to give the flour time to absorb the liquid.

**4** Spray the waffle maker with canola oil or coconut oil to avoid the batter sticking to the waffle iron. Place the batter in the waffle maker just enough to fill the opening. Once the waffles are golden brown gently take them out of the waffle iron.

**5** Enjoy your waffles and you can freeze the extra waffles in freezer bags for approximately one month.

— Excerpt from Josh Cohen's "Comfort Food For An Uncomfortable Stomach, By a Kid for Kids"

ments "that allowed me to feel like I wasn't missing out."

"The recipes can really be for anyone," Cohen said. "But I just really wanted to help kids."

"Comfort Food For An Uncomfortable Stomach, By a Kid for Kids" is available on Amazon.com. On Oct. 23, the Crohn's & Colitis

Foundation will be hosting a "Raise Your Spirits" fundraiser, offering at-home tastings kits, while the Southern California Distillery provides a virtual tour of the spirit samples, food pairing and snacks. For more information, visit crohnscolitisfoundation.org.

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# CANYON

Continued from page R1

undertaken by the conservancy.

The nonprofit, initially funded by Donald Bren, has managed open space in Orange County — primarily in Irvine and Newport Beach — through its 15-year history.

The project was done in partnership with the Orange County Transportation Authority as part of meeting the agency's mitigation requirements to offset the damage it does to the environment. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently deemed the project a success.

The restoration took years of effort from the conservancy's small staff. In addition to the years of unchecked livestock grazing and fires, much of the vegetation had been overwhelmed by nonnative weeds.

The staff restored native grasslands, coastal sage scrub, oak woodland and chaparral.

Only about 2% of the original native grasslands remain in the region, and coastal sage scrub supports many endangered species like the gnatcatcher.

The effort wasn't easy due to the complex geography of the area.

"It's a pretty big, rugged area, so there were all sorts of challenges," Freese said.

"We were in a historic drought for about five years since we started the project. We didn't have irrigation, so it was a challenge to get native vegetation established. A lot of times roads were washed out and we couldn't get in there during winter. It's been a fun project but it's definitely had its challenges."

To provide "buffers" to the restored land, the conservancy did a less intensive form of restoration, called target invasive control, by removing a handful of weed species they identified as a threat to the sustainability of the habitats.

The conservancy hopes that the habitat will attract larger numbers of animals



Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer

**PROJECT MANAGER** Robert Freese walks a ridge road above Bee Flat Canyon where he looks at the growth of yellow tarplant.

including cactus wren, hawks, mountain lions, bobcats, gray foxes and reptiles like the orange-throated whiptail and horned lizards.

Attracting gnatcatcher populations back to the area is particularly important.

The California gnatcatcher is a federally and state-listed endangered species, and much of the restoration work in Southern California is driven by its survival.

The conservancy will be managing and monitoring the land to see if the animals return.

So far, Freese said they have seen more cactus wren than before.

The conservancy will continue looking for new weed species and insects that could threaten the habitat.

"We are still waiting on the California gnatcatcher

to return," Freese said. "They have returned to some of our restoration sites, not Bee Flat Canyon. But we have certainly built good habitat for them, so I expect eventually they will show up too."

The conservancy has restored about 250 acres of land so far and manages about 30,000 acres in Orange County.

The conservancy is currently working on restoring other lands near Bee Flat Canyon and a riparian stream site in Silverado Canyon.

It's important work to conservationists like Freese.

"These sites are really beautiful once they are restored — full of wildflowers and a diverse mix of shrubs," Freese said. "You can just sense the life that's out there."

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**A BURNED** piece of old fencing shows the scar of brush fire at the bottom of Bee Flat Canyon.

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