

LA MESA COURIER

October 23 – November 26, 2026

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Helix royalty



Trinity Bush was named Helix Charter High homecoming queen and Matt Bargaquast homecoming king during half time of the homecoming game, which the Highlanders won 49-14. See more on page 14. (Photo by Lavy Pham/Helix Charter High)

COVER STORY

More strife for Grossmont school board — conservative bloc fractures over trustee's misconduct allegations

Public records revealed Trustee Jim Kelly leaked confidential information and attempted to secretly influence the superintendent through proxies, but the school board blocked an official reprimand. While Kelly avoided censure, his method of doing so did nothing to offset the public perception that the Grossmont Union High School Board is a dysfunctional body willing to flout its own rules — and even state law. Their 3-2 vote on Thursday left the crowd at the meeting in an uproar, screaming “cowards!” at the allies who protected Kelly. PAGES 3-4

BUSINESS

La Mesa baker turns family passion into full-time business

In August, Megan Loney left a 12-year career installing commercial HVAC controls to focus full-time on Gemini Twins Bakery, the home-based business she built while raising her family in the La Mesa house where she grew up. Her parents live next door. Loney's baking journey began in 2019, when she took on a different challenge at home. She started experimenting with a sourdough starter as part of an effort to feed her family better. PAGE 7



ELECTION

La Mesa mayor candidates draw lines on homeless and affordability

The mayoral candidates — council members Patricia Dillard and Laura Lothian, former treasurer Jim Stieringer and businessman Quinn Reese — fielded questions at the forum, alongside council candidates Moana Alo and Amanda-Dawn Natalia. The four running for mayor all opposed SB 79's state-mandated transit-oriented development as an overreach from Sacramento. But sharp divisions arose over how the city responds to homelessness. PAGE 6





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More strife for Grossmont school board



Grossmont Union High School District board president Rob Shield reads aloud a proposed censure he wrote of trustee Jim Kelly, second from the right. (Photo by Drew Sitton/Times of San Diego)

By DREW SITTON
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — Conservative members of the Grossmont school board blocked an official reprimand of one of their own after public records revealed the trustee leaked confidential information and attempted to secretly influence the superintendent through proxies.

While trustee Jim Kelly avoided censure, his method of doing so did nothing to offset the public perception that the Grossmont Union High School Board is a dysfunctional body willing to flout its own rules— and even state law. Their 3-2 vote Thursday left the crowd at the meeting in an uproar, screaming “cowards!” at the allies who protected Kelly.

The meeting, in a way, summed up years of district strife that many community members fear has distracted from Grossmont’s core mission, educating East County students.

It included a direct clash between former allies, Kelly’s reliance on rules of order to stifle public discussion, allegations of cronyism, improper influence on the superintendent through her husband, and breach of attorney-client privilege, as revealed in emails obtained through a records request. ICE, the controversial federal agency, even found its way into the discussion.

Kelly, despite being the focus of the censure attempt, successfully suppressed much of the discussion of his alleged misdeeds through bylaw manipulation. He flatly denied the accusations — even after board president Rob Shield read excerpts of his emails aloud to the audience — but did not attempt to counter the evidence against him.

Instead, he focused on rules of order, including making motions that barred

discussion. Kelly, in fact, made the motion to censure himself in order to end board debate. He and two colleagues, Gary Woods and Scott Eckert, voted against the censure. Shield and Chris Fite were on the losing end of the vote.

Kelly has come under fire in the past, from staff, students and members of the public upset by back room governance that cost the district millions in settlements, as well as the board’s treatment of librarians, teachers, mentally ill students and LGBTQ+ people.

This time, it was a former ally, Shield, who called out Kelly’s disregard of board bylaws and state law, including the Brown Act, California’s law on transparent governance.

A public records request from the *San Diego Union-Tribune* had revealed that Kelly shared sensitive board information with outsiders months after Shield sent a memo to colleagues about following the rules.

The vote made public a private division between Shield and the three other conservative board members, Kelly, Woods and Eckert. For many years, the bloc voted in lockstep even as public frustration grew over their politicking and alleged attempts to govern out of the public eye.

“This gives me no pleasure. We have a long history, and honestly, I had what I thought was a cooperative relationship with Mr. Kelly for 18 of the last 20 years,” said Shield, who wrote the motion to censure Kelly. “However, I have no choice because I’ve done everything I could do to encourage, challenge, press him into compliance.”

The proposed censure outlined several incidents in which Kelly’s behavior

Continued on Page 4

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MORE STRIFE

Continued from Page 3

allegedly either violated board bylaws or the Brown Act. Allegations included Kelly sharing a confidential legal memo with outsiders, making baseless accusations on the dais and in closed session, and attempting to control the superintendent.

Despite the email evidence, Eckert and Woods continued to back Kelly. Woods stayed silent on the dais, even as public commenters accused him of being Kelly's crony. Eckert, meanwhile, first moved to table the motion until after the election, saying the timing of the allegations becoming public felt like an intentional political strategy.

The *Union-Tribune's* public records request led to a search which revealed in September that Kelly shared confidential information with non-board members in July.

"I don't condone releasing closed session information, but my big concern here is the timing," Eckert said. "This has, in my perception, a political agenda."

'A smoking gun'

Shield defended the timing, saying that it was Kelly, through his alleged

misdeeds, who planted a bomb that happened to detonate before the election.

"You can accuse me of manipulative timing, but I promise you, it came to my attention, and oh gee whiz, this is a smoking gun," Shield said. Shield is not seeking reelection after serving on the board for 20 years. Kelly, who has been on the board for 24 years, is.

"I have suspected many of these things. But Kelly handed me the smoking gun, where he clearly is inappropriately releasing confidential information," Shield said. "I'm sorry, that has crossed the line of tolerability. It has nothing to do with (November)."

In what to Shield was the most egregious example of misconduct, Kelly forwarded emails in July though they were labeled "Attorney-Client Privileged Memo" in the subject line. In the body of the email, district staffer Collin McGlashen restated that it contained information protected by attorney-client privilege and should not be forwarded or shared.

Kelly sent the document to multiple people asking for their thoughts, including district staffers and an outside attorney, John Howard. While that breach of confidentiality was the focus of Shield's

proposed censure, emails that revealed Kelly attempted to control the superintendent through influencing her spouse, a prominent former lawmaker, enraged the only Democrat on the board, Fite.

Influencing the superintendent?

Kelly sent emails to former Assembly member Steve Baldwin, asking him to convince Superintendent Kirsten Vital Brulte's spouse to pressure her to sue the state of California over its law protecting student data from ICE.

Vital Brulte's husband is another former assembly member, Jim Brulte, once one of the most powerful and influential Republicans in California.

Kelly appears to think she owes him her job — and loyalty.

As he wrote in January, "I think she knows that is because of me she has her current position but her actions do not suggest any sort of appreciation or help."

Baldwin forwarded the entire email exchange to Brulte, including Kelly's request for discretion since he had shared inside information. Then, the superintendent's husband emailed Kelly directly to say he was disappointed about the way in which Kelly talked about his wife and would

share the exchange with her. However, he believed she would be hurt by it.

Vital Brulte stayed quiet and blank-faced through much of the meeting, as public commenters praised her work in the district and expressed outrage that she had been treated poorly by Kelly.

Loud denial

The same could not be said for the board members.

Kelly shook his head and mouthed denials at public commenters.

But he was more circumspect in his disagreement when Shield read the proposed censure, which included excerpts of his emails. He kept his head down, eyes nearly closed.

Yet when fellow board member Fite attempted to speak, Kelly interrupted and spoke over him until a visibly frustrated Fite reached over and turned off his microphone.

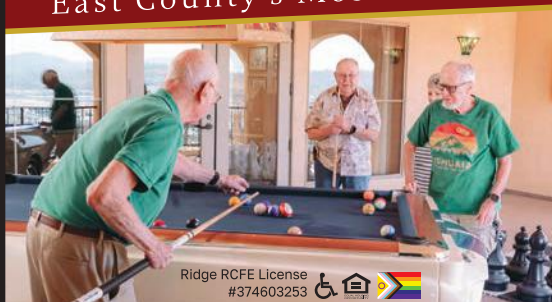
Eventually, able to speak uninterrupted, Fite accused Kelly of not believing in democratic rule. Fite noted that when Kelly fell on the losing side of a 3-2 vote to block the passage of a new immigration policy, rather than respecting the result, Kelly tried to manipulate Vital Brulte.

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Grossmont to bring back librarians next school year, ending labor complaint

By DREW SITTON
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — The Grossmont Union High School District announced Wednesday that librarians will be back on its nine campuses starting next year.

The reversal comes over a year after Grossmont’s elected board first decided to cut dozens of student-facing staff positions. While it was not the only controversial decision the board has made, it did receive the most widespread public backlash, with hundreds packed into board meetings to protest the staff cuts.

The teachers union, Grossmont Education Association, went further, filing an unfair practice charge with the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) in November 2025.

The new agreement brings that labor case to a close. Several civil suits from affected staff continue to make their way through the courts.

The agreement between Grossmont’s board and the teachers association does not restore all 49 positions eliminated in 2025. It only covers the nine teacher-librarians who ran the libraries while also teaching research and technology skills to students.

Jason Balistreri, the former librarian at Mt. Miguel High School, praised the agreement.

“I previously described our elimination as a ‘great injustice.’ Today’s reinstatement marks a great victory for our community’s combined efforts to bring justice to this district,” Balistreri said in a statement.

The Library Media Specialists will have the option to return to their previous campus roles in the 2027–2028 school year with the same work schedules and stipends. Librarians who chose to stay in the district were reassigned to classrooms during the reduction in force push. The librarians will not get backpay, damages or financial relief from their year in classroom positions.

The librarians also will be protected from future layoffs through 2029, so the board cannot immediately reverse the decision.

“This agreement is focused on the future and serves the best interest of our East County community following a challenging period,” said outgoing Governing Board President Robert Shield in a statement.

In addition to filing the unfair practices charge, the teachers association actively



Protesters gather for a photo at the Grossmont Union High School District meeting on April 24, 2025 at Grossmont High School. (Photo by Drew Sitton/ Times of San Diego)

campaigned against sitting board members for the first time. While Shield did not seek reelection, two others who voted for the reduction in force, Jim Kelly and Gary Woods, are on the November ballot.

Instead, the union has endorsed Jeneé Littrell, a former GUHSD counselor who led recovery efforts at Santana High School after the 2001 shooting, in Area 3, former Lakeside Middle School principal and 2026 Lakeside Citizen of the Year, Steve Mull, in Area 4, and retired West Hills math teacher Pete Mergens in Area 5. “It’s about restoring trust, accountability and putting students first,” said teachers association president Stephanie Macceca in a statement. “Our educators decided enough was enough.”

The teachers union continues to campaign against Kelly and Woods, accusing them and the board of cronyism, governing behind closed doors and financial mismanagement.

For example, the board said the layoffs were necessary to prevent a \$2.2 million budget shortfall over the next three years. However, in 2026, the board greenlit a \$1.7 million infusion to athletics.

In the librarians’ agreement, the district said it was not admitting to wrongdoing and was instead reinstating librarians in order to promote “harmonious labor relations and to avoid the uncertainty, inconvenience, and expense of further litigation.”

Other lawsuits have cost the district plenty, including a \$1.2 million settlement in December 2025 with a special education administrator, who alleged she faced anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination from district leaders, who called her a “witch” in private chats.

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DISTRIBUTION: La Mesa Courier is distributed free the fourth Friday of every month.
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La Mesa mayor candidates draw lines on homelessness and affordability

By DREW SITTON
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — Since 1990, La Mesa has had only two mayors. The city is about to elect a third.

Dozens, many clad in brown and gold, piled into La Mesa First United Methodist Church on Tuesday to hear from candidates, while slyly checking the Padres score.

The mayoral candidates — council members Patricia Dillard and Laura Lothian, former treasurer Jim Stieringer and businessman Quinn Reese — fielded questions at the forum, alongside council candidates Moana Alo and Amanda-Dawn Natalia.

The four running for mayor all opposed SB 79's state-mandated transit-oriented development as an overreach from Sacramento. But sharp divisions arose over how the city responds to homelessness.

Lothian, La Mesa's only Republican council member, stated that she wanted to end the Homeless Outreach and Mobile Engagement (HOME) program, in which social workers rather than police respond to most homeless calls for service when no crime is being committed.

The HOME team has housed 380 people since it began in late 2020. In the latest point-in-time count, the number of unsheltered people counted dropped by a quarter to 39 people. But Lothian noted that the number of HOME team clinicians has doubled from two to four, as has the number of homeless clients they interact with per month.

"Our outreach is actually acting as a magnet," Lothian said. "At some point, a city has to say there has to be accountability... the person has to accept the assistance or help, or be compelled to."

The forum did not allow for rebuttals or directly responding to people, but candidates made an exception to disagree with Lothian on this point. Dillard said it was a lack of affordability, not the HOME team, that increased homelessness in the city.

"You can't just blame it on a solution," Dillard said. "There are people who are being helped and saved, but it's against



The Rev. Christian DeMent begins a candidate forum at La Mesa First United Methodist Church, a tradition since at least 2012. (Photo by Drew Sitton/Times of San Diego)

the law to make them. So we'll never be able to do that as long as we have democracy. We cannot force someone to get help, but we can help the ones who are willing to get help."

The four mayoral candidates were joined by Moana Alo and Amanda-Dawn Natalia, the two candidates for two seats on city council.

While their race is not competitive, the forum allowed them to share how they will lead once on the council.

Attorney Natalia said green efforts, from preserving parks to protecting the environment, are her focus. Natalia says she plans to push for expanding cool zones during extreme heat waves and offer a program to provide portable air conditioning units to lower-income residents and a moratorium on city staff working outside during extreme heat.

"Green spaces and nature are my passion," Natalia said. "They're not my profession, but I have had the opportunity to learn about how to preserve them, how to care for them, and I want to bring that to the dais."

City Council candidate Alo advocated for more affordable housing options in La Mesa while focusing on her background as a renter and single mother.

"In this time and space, we don't often see a lot of those voices in the decisions that are being made," Alo said. "I hope to be a voice for those folks."

More than partisanship, renting versus homeownership proved a division between candidates.

Alo and the only other renter, Reese, were more favorable to new housing that could drive down rents than other candidates. Reese said it was affordability issues that led him to enter the race.

"(Affordability is) essentially the lens I use for which to see everything," Reese said.

The final mayoral candidate, Stieringer, has served on the Grossmont Healthcare Board and as La Mesa treasurer has run several unsuccessful campaigns for other posts, but declared that the city is effectively run.

"I have kind of minor goals as mayor," Stieringer said. Among them are improving the aesthetics of a Vietnam War memorial and blocking new bike lanes.

Dillard, who sits on the Metropolitan Transit System, touted micro-transit projects and pledged to move plans to expand the library forward.

Currently, all city departments have been asked to cut their budgets by 10%. Lothian said she would focus on increasing the city's revenue, to fully fund maintenance staff for parks and fixing streets.

La Mesa First pastor Christian DeMent moderated the forum. He implored the audience not just to look to those seated on the stage to improve La Mesa, but also to find that in each other.

"We share something really important with one another," DeMent said. "We all have a stake in the future of La Mesa, and that future depends not only on the people we elect, but on all of us: neighbors who care about our neighborhood, the businesses, the schools, the streets, the parks and the people who call this city home."

La Mesa baker turns a family passion into a full-time business

By KAREN PEARLMAN
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — Like the bread she makes, Megan Loney starts her rise early. Loney's sourdough baking begins around 2 a.m. in her La Mesa kitchen, where she sometimes lifts and folds 42 pounds of dough at a time. Between steps, she also fits in feedings for 7-month-old Micaiah, the son she shares with wife Crystal Palmer.

In August, Loney left a 12-year career installing commercial HVAC controls to focus full-time on Gemini Twins Bakery, the home-based business she built while raising her family in the La Mesa house where she grew up. Her parents live next door. "It was extremely hard to leave that career, especially because of the people I was leaving behind," Loney said.

The trades had given her a start in the workforce after six years as a stay-at-home mom. In 2014, she earned her GED and began an electrical systems technician apprenticeship through Associated Builders and Contractors.

"I tried applying a few places like Target and Kohl's, but heard no response," Loney said. "And then a coworker of my wife's mentioned apprenticeships. You work, you go to school, you get experience and you get paid. I was in."

Now she is working to make the bakery the family's livelihood.

Rise of Gemini Twins Bakery

Loney's baking journey began in 2019, when she took on a different challenge at home. She started experimenting with a sourdough starter as part of an effort to feed her family better.

Before she could bake her first loaf, she had to learn to maintain the starter, the

fermented mixture of flour and water that helps the dough rise. Keeping the starter alive felt like an extra part-time job she hadn't signed up for.

"I probably killed that starter over a dozen times," Loney said.

By early 2020, she got one going long enough to bake her first loaf, then began to seek out what else she could make with it.

The baking coincided with broader changes in her family's life. Loney said she and Palmer gave up alcohol in 2021 as part of an effort to improve their health and be positive role models for their oldest child.

By late 2023, Palmer was encouraging Loney to sell what she baked.

"I had no idea where to begin, so I started sending samples to work with my mother-in-law who works for Amazon," Loney said. "Those were my first customers. And man, were they loyal. Every week I'd have at least four to five orders, and they loved everything I offered them."

She formalized the business in 2024, naming it Gemini Twins Bakery, honoring twins Akira and Ezekial, whom she and her wife welcomed in 2022.

In 2025, while expecting their fourth child, Loney began working to build the bakery enough to support the family. She gave birth at home and was back mixing dough within hours, she said.

She worked to grow the business to the point where the family could live on its income, and in August she left her job.

"This was the first year we made any profit," she said, adding that the family still reinvests 75 percent in the bakery and uses the rest for living expenses.

Not loafing around

The bakery offers naturally fermented



Megan Loney and wife Crystal Palmer of Gemini Twins Bakery. (Photo courtesy of Gemini Twins Bakery)

sourdough breads as well as cookies, bagels, cinnamon rolls, scones and seasonal treats. Flavors include blueberry lemon basil and Dilly Jack, a savory loaf with dill, Monterey Jack cheese and dried onion.

Loney said the bestseller is roasted jalapeño cheddar, a bread she initially hesitated to offer because "you can find it everywhere." Loney said roasting the jalapeños gives Gemini Twins' version a distinctive flavor.

She sources flour from Central Milling, grinds her own whole wheat and avoids ultra-processed ingredients where possible. Her dough undergoes a bulk fermentation lasting four to eight hours, followed by a cold fermentation of up to 48 hours.

But baking ingredients are only part of what goes into each loaf.

"It's the blood, sweat, and tears that go into making everything we offer that is the real answer," she said. She listed "the burns from pulling things out of the oven while holding a baby, the cuts trying to fit large equipment through

small doorways, the exhaustion from six 2 a.m. days in a row."

A neighborhood bakery

Loney's first customers after the Amazon fan club came from La Mesa neighbors, a following she and her family built one doorstep at a time.

She designed, printed and hand-delivered thousands of flyers promoting early driveway pop-ups, giving each event its own theme.

A homemade "SOURDOUGH" sign on a utility pole helped direct customers to the house. Today, a 12-foot feather flag in the bakery's signature pastel green makes the business easier to spot.

"Our biggest fans started right here in our neighborhood," Loney said. "Once we decided we wanted to make this a community thing, we put in the footwork."

The bakery has also helped the family get to know more of the people around them.

"We have made such dear friends with people we may never have gotten to know if it wasn't for the bakery," she said.

Driveway pop-ups take place on the first and third Saturdays of each month. The bakery also sells at the Lakeside Farmers Market on Thursdays, at SHARP Grossmont Hospital Farmers Market every other Friday, at the Cardiff Farmers Market on Saturdays and at the San Carlos Farmers Market on the fourth Sunday.

Gemini Twins Bakery also supplies La Mesa-based Come Back Coffee Co. and recently began selling at April Beltz's pop-up called "The Farmstand" on Garfield Street in La Mesa. Weekly pre-orders are available through HotPlate.

Continued on Page 9

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Casa de Pico celebrates 55 years of Mexican flavor, color and community

By ROBIN DOHRN-SIMPSON
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — What were you doing on Nov. 4, 1971?

Diane Powers remembers exactly where she was, since that was the day she opened the Bazaar del Mundo in Old Town San Diego.

Today, she is celebrating 55 years of business with her first restaurant, Casa de Pico, a dining tradition in La Mesa built on handmade tortillas, mariachi music, and memorable gatherings.

In her own corner of Old Town, she opened colorful shops full of Mexican arts and crafts for locals and tourists. Today, we are celebrating both the restaurant's longevity and its lasting place in the San Diego food scene.

After losing her lease in Old Town, Powers (affectionately called the "mother of modern Old Town") set out to create restaurants throughout San Diego for locals to enjoy the colorful rooms with their Mexican-inspired décor and festive ambiance.

Casa de Pico relocated to La Mesa in 2005 and set the standard for fun family dining with an immersive experience; strolling Mariachi musicians serenade guests as they dine and colorfully dressed women hand-make tortillas in the front of the restaurant.

She also moved the Bazaar del Mundo to the outskirts of Old Town. This vibrant quartet of shops features Ariana's hand-painted fashions, Artes de Mexico's Talavera pottery and Oaxacan carvings, Guatemala Shop's woven textiles and Haitian art, and the Kitchen Shop's vibrant ceramics and spices.

The Casa de Pico menu is extensive, with breakfast, lunch and dinner menus including appetizers, soups and salads, chef's picks, seafood specials, tacos, burritos, enchiladas, healthy dining options, and kids' menus.

The current chef's favorites are the Pico Chimichanga, Chiles Poblanos, Cheese Crisp Special, Pollo Fundido, Chile Verde, Chile Colorado, and Ropa Vieja. All of these dishes come with rice and beans and piping hot, freshly made tortillas.



Casa de Pico, at 5500 Grossmont Center Drive, in the Grossmont Shopping Center. (Photo by Robin Dohrn-Simpson/Special for Times of San Diego)

"Our corn tortillas have an authentic and delectable taste that brings back fond memories of childhood for some of us. They offer a unique earthy flavor with a slight hint of sweetness. Their flavor and texture make them incredibly addictive," Powers said.

It's always fun to try the house specials, which include carnitas, Carne Asada Tampiqueña, Steak Picado, Especial de Flautas, Tamales, and La Especial de Juan.

For many diners, a Mexican meal would not be complete without a Margarita. With many options, a unique one is called the Smoky Mezcal, featuring IZO Mezcal, pineapple juice, and a Tajín rim.

"Fifty-five years of success doesn't just belong to one person. This belongs to an amazing team— cooks, servers, shopkeepers, and their children and families — whose loyalty and passion have helped us create memorable dining experiences and a piece of San Diego history," Powers said.

Celebration festivities start on Wednesday, Nov. 4, and continue through Saturday, Nov. 7. See their website for schedules of events during this celebration.

Casa de Pico is located at 5500 Grossmont Center Drive, in the Grossmont Shopping Center. Hours are Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. until 9 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays 11 a.m. until 10 p.m., and Sundays 10 a.m. until 9 p.m. Call 619-463-3267 or visit casadepico.com.

Aromi Restaurant: A culinary journey through Italy

By ROBIN DOHRN-SIMPSON
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — Step through the doors of Aromi Restaurant and let the flavors of Italy carry you away. Aromi translates to “flavor” in English, and when you walk in the door, the distinct aromas of Italian cuisine that we all love will greet you: oregano, basil, rosemary, and thyme, to name a few.

Here, the country’s rich culinary tapes-try unfolds from region to region, celebrating the soulful traditions and distinctive flavors that make Italian cuisine so irresistible. The freshest seasonal ingredients are thoughtfully transformed into elegant dishes that evoke the warmth of an Italian table — from the rolling hills of Tuscany and the sun-drenched shores of the Mediterranean to the rustic kitchens of the north.

At Aromi, every plate tells a story, inviting diners to slow down, savor the moment, and taste of Italy with every delicious bite.

There’s something undeniably indulgent about watching pasta take its delicious journey through a cheese wheel.

The restaurant features four different cheese wheels: Parmigiano Reggiano, Grana Padano, Pecorino Romano, and Black Pecorino. Each silky strand of the chef’s daily pasta is swirled in a bowl,

gathering layers of creamy, savory flavor.

The experience is as much about the artistry as the taste — the warm pasta mingling with rich, aromatic cheeses until every bite becomes velvety and luxurious. It’s a playful yet decadent way to experience Italy’s love affair with pasta and cheese.

A tableside experience delights everyone in the restaurant, especially those lucky diners who witness the presentation as it happens.

The pasta selection is mouthwatering. The tartufosa, fettuccine with truffle butter cream sauce and porcini mushroom sauce, or the pistacchiosa, spaghetti with pistachio cream sauce and stracciatella cheese, will delight many diners. The pastas are fresh, and they offer gluten-free pastas.

If you’re not in the mood for pasta, try the Girgliata Siciliana, which is breaded sirloin steak with Italian sausage and a meat roll stuffed with mozzarella cheese. They also offer Cioppino loaded with clams, mussels, squid, and other fish of the day. Roman cuisine is represented in the saltimbocca with veal scaloppini, prosciutto in a butter-wine reduction sauce and accented with mashed potatoes.

Adjacent to the main dining area is Pizza by Aromi. With multiple pizza options, you might have to return many times to try them all. Some favorites are the Pizza



Luis Garcia tosses pizza dough at Pizza by Aromi. (Photo by Robin Dohrn-Simpson/Special for Times of San Diego)

Rustica with Italian sausage, mushroom, fresh mozzarella, and Parmesan cheese, and the Parmigiana Pizza loaded with fried eggplant, tomato sauce, and fresh mozzarella and Parmesan cheese.

Great news for the gluten-free diner: here you will find a tasty gluten-free crust. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, the chef offers a special pizza. This changes every weekend.

An extensive wine list of imported Italian wines rounds out the menu and provides perfect food pairings.

Whether it’s a romantic evening, a special celebration, or a casual night out, Aromi

AROMI RESTAURANT

Where: 7200 Parkway in La Mesa.

Hours: Mondays through Thursdays, 4-9:30 p.m., and Fridays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.

Info: To make reservations, call 619-303-1955 or go to aromisd.com



The restaurant features four different cheese wheels: Parmigiano Reggiano, Grana Padano, Pecorino Romano, and Black Pecorino. (Photo by Robin Dohrn-Simpson/Special for Times of San Diego)

invites everyone to experience the magic it has to offer. You are welcome to dine any day of the week to indulge in the flavors of Italy and create lasting memories.

“We wanted to bring our love of Italian cuisine to our patrons,” said Francesco Mancino, partner/chef.

LA MESA BAKER

Continued from Page 7

Growing without losing the family

Loney said she produces close to 200 loaves a week, plus sweets, using a standard double oven. An attempt to add a Pacific Beach farmers market stretched the family too thin, she said, so she is focusing on existing outlets and saving for a dedicated bread oven.

The business operates under a cottage food permit from the County of San Diego, a temporary food facility permit with the county, and business licenses with La Mesa and National City.

Managing the finances has been another learning curve, and keeping production manageable remains important, she said. “I have learned that a small, perfected

menu is better than a large mediocre one,” she said. “I do still find myself trying to make too many different things on different occasions, and it quickly puts me back in my place. I have also had the pleasure of overbooking myself, overbaking myself, and having complete meltdowns when things start to go wrong! I’ve learned it’s best to stay humble and know your limits in these situations.”

Family remains central to the operation. Loney and her wife are raising their four children and maintaining a small urban



A boule of sourdough bread from Gemini Twins Bakery. (Photo courtesy of Gemini Twins Bakery)

homestead with chickens and rabbits. Palmer handles dishes, cooking and packaging while attending school full time to earn a bachelor’s degree in psychology. The children help with labeling and accompany their parents to markets.

Asked about work-life balance, Loney joked, “Currently we have none.”

Looking ahead

For now, a storefront isn’t in the plans. Loney said she and Palmer hope eventually to buy land where they can grow food and perhaps build a shop. In the meantime, she is focused

on growing preorders.

She also said the road that led them to sobriety will tie into the bakery.

“We are creating a donation box and donating our market leftovers once a month to local sober living homes and treatment centers,” Loney said.

For customers who worry about bothering her, the message is simple. In her August announcement on social media, Loney wrote, “You are never inconveniencing me by ordering bread,” adding that every order helps support her family and the business she hopes to grow.

Find Gemini Twins Bakery on Instagram @gemini_twins_bakery; on Facebook; through weekly preorder drops at hotplate.com/gtbakery619; via email at GTBakery619@outlook.com or by calling 619-565-0128.

Wise Owl Gym in Santee packs a punch for those fighting Parkinson's

By SEAN MONNEY
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SANTEE — Danielle Barrett first picked up boxing 10 years ago as an outlet for the stresses of caregiving for her mother, who had Parkinson's disease.

Now, she's the head coach of a boxing fitness program for seniors with Parkinson's, the first of its kind in East San Diego County.

"What a way for me to give back to that community," she said.

Barrett was already a boxing coach when she learned about Rock Steady Boxing, a noncontact program designed specifically for people with Parkinson's.

She discovered it too late for her own mother, who was already bedridden.

"This could have been life-changing for her," Barrett said.

The program's high-intensity rhythmic exercises have been shown to help slow the progression of symptoms like tremors, rigidity and balance problems.

Rock Steady Boxing is an international nonprofit with more than 800 affiliate

locations, including seven others in San Diego County.

Wise Owl Fit in Santee is the first gym in East County to host the program, which launched there in June. Barrett said enrollment has grown through referrals from doctors and members.

Connie Tenorio is one of the boxers in the program and has a background in martial arts and kickboxing.

"Since they diagnosed me with Parkinson's, this program made me feel useful, like I can still punch," she said. "Plus, it gave me exercise, so it made me feel normal."

The class is intense. Parkinson's is a degenerative brain disorder without a cure, and exercise can help people slow the progress of the disease.

Barrett puts the boxers through all kinds of drills and circuits, focusing on speed, balance, and large movements.

Throughout the hour-long class, Barrett calls out encouragement, gives each boxer individual attention, and keeps the workout fun.



Danielle Barrett, head coach for Rock Steady Boxing at Wise Owl Fit in Santee.
(Photo by Sean Monney/Special for Times of San Diego)

Kelly Johnson, the wife of one of the boxers in the class, said her husband benefits not only from the physical exercise but also from social connections and camaraderie.

She said Barrett has created an environment that feels safe and nonjudgmental. "Everyone's at different levels, everyone has different challenges," she said. "We're just all here trying to make the best out of it."

The Rock Steady Boxing class has become a community for people and families dealing with Parkinson's, aligning with the vision Karl Burris had when he opened Wise Owl Fit in March.

Wise Owl Fit is a group fitness gym for adults 55 and older, a project Burris has been developing for years since he became a physical therapist.

He believes older adults need to train

like athletes in an environment that pushes them to improve their fitness.

"We're waking up to the fact that we're significantly underloading older adults," he said.

Burris wants to help older people recognize their own physical abilities and challenge themselves not only to maintain their health but to become stronger.

Burris learned about Rock Steady Boxing when he was in school for physical therapy, and the program aligned perfectly with his mission for the gym.

Now, Burris and Barrett are focused on reaching more people in the community and getting the word out.

"All the neurologists that see seniors with Parkinson's know about this program," Barrett said. "They just don't know that we're here."

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La Mesa Reads — Horror books to set the tone for Halloween October 2026



La Mesa has kicked off fall, not with falling leaves and cozy sweaters, but with an excruciating heat wave. It’s madness! But maybe we can get our autumnal selves centered by focusing on the fall highlight of October: Halloween! We’ve got some nice horror books to set the tone for a scary season.

Although we have discussed it in this column recently, I feel that I have to begin by mentioning the novel “The Buffalo Hunter Hunter” by Stephen Graham Jones; this book was selected by One Book, One San Diego as the 2026 title for San Diegans to collectively read and discuss. It is a mixture of horror and historical fiction, a story within a story inspired by the Marais Massacre, combining revenge, vampires, power reversals and violence. Read along with

the whole County with this title. While ostensibly a science fiction tale, “There Is No Antimemetics Division” by a pseudonymous author known as “qntm” (aka Sam Hughes) has its share of the unsettling and uncanny. A mysterious government agency that secretly protects mankind from strange entities and unexplainable powers faces its greatest challenge: organisms whose very proximity destroys thoughts and information. How do you function as a human when you can’t trust your senses or memories? How do you fight an enemy you can’t perceive, or that you forget as soon as you look away? Sci-fi and action with a premise that gets creepier the further the tale unfurls.

Patrick Horvath’s “Beneath the Trees Where Nobody Sees” is a graphic novel horror/thriller that every reviewer summarizes the same way because it’s so accurate: “‘Dexter’ meets Richard Scarry’s children’s books.” The story is set in a wholesome small town of Woodbrook, home to cuddly, anthropomorphic



(Photos of book covers courtesy of La Mesa Library)

animals. But the friendly bear who runs the town hardware store has a dark secret: spends her weekends traveling to the big city, where she lets loose her inner serial killer. Her daily life remains carefree, until a grisly murder is discovered in Woodbrook, one that our evil protagonist didn’t commit! Now she must discover the other serial killer in town, to prevent people from digging too deep and discovering her own bloody deeds.

“Ring Shout” by P. Djèli Clark is a horror book reminiscent of 2016’s hit “Lovecraft Country.” Both blend the terror and violence of Jim Crow racism with

supernatural monsters to highlight both the unknown darkness and the well-known darkness of hatred. In “Ring Shout,” a trio of Black women in 1920s Georgia fight the machinations of demonic forces that inflame and feed off the bigotry and fury of the Ku Klux Klan. It’s a brisk read, peppered with forgotten American history that’s as scary as any horror movie.

You can shake off the October scares with some comforting events at La Mesa Library. On Nov. 7 at 2 p.m., enjoy the return of the talented San Diego Classical Guitar Ensemble, performing songs, both classical and modern. And on Nov. 21 at 2 p.m., we will have a (rescheduled) presentation from the San Diego History Center: The History of San Diego from 1915 to Today, spanning the Great Depression, World Wars, and the city’s rise in recent decades. We hope to see you there! Find more information at www.sdcl.org/LaMesa.



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Halloween in La Mesa Village for people and pets

By ROMAN AGUILAR
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — Downtown La Mesa businesses will welcome trick-or-treaters and their costumed pets Saturday, Oct. 31, for the eighth annual Halloween in La Mesa Village, featuring free candy, stilt walkers and a pet costume contest.

The free event, organized by the La Mesa Village Association, runs from 4 to 6 p.m. along La Mesa Boulevard and

adjacent streets between Grant and Acacia avenues, on both sides of Spring Street. No tickets are required. For more information and an updated list of participating businesses, visit the La Mesa Village Association's website.

Participating shops and restaurants will distribute candy and other treats, while Halloween-themed stilt walkers roam the boulevard and interact with visitors.

The celebration began in 2019 after several downtown business owners discussed organizing a Halloween event for local families, said Elizabeth Ranta, who handles marketing for the La Mesa Village Association.

"It was just a conversation with a few local business owners who just love Halloween," Ranta said. "We proposed it to the board and they were all for it."

What started as a trick-or-treating event has expanded to include stilt walkers and the Howl-o-Ween Pet Costume Contest, which attracts about 50 to 75 registered pets, according to Ranta.

"It's really focused on the local community coming down and also interacting with those small businesses," Ranta said.

"A lot of the time, the owners are out there handing out candy as well."

The pet costume contest begins with check-in at 3:30 p.m. at the fountain courtyard near the La Mesa Boulevard trolley station. Pets can compete in two categories: "Best Pet/Pet Parent Combo" and "Most Festive Halloween Pet," with prizes awarded to the top three entries in each.

Some participants have turned the contest into an elaborate production.

Ranta recalled a couple at last year's event who built a large pirate ship with simulated cannon smoke. Dressed in pirate costumes, the couple pulled the ship with their costumed dog riding at the bow.

"They were dressed up in full pirate costumes, as well as their dog," Ranta said. "It was just amazing. They really outdid themselves."

While the contest brings pets and their owners together, businesses throughout the Village have developed their own ways to participate.

At La Mesa Thrift Store, 8340 Lemon Ave., children can collect free books instead of candy.



A family dressed as Super Mario characters poses with their costumed dog during the Howl-o-Ween Pet Costume Contest in La Mesa Village. (Photo by CeCe Canton Photography)

Suzanne Kirkland, president of the La Mesa Community Welfare Association, which operates the thrift store, said the idea came from a friend who preferred handing out books to trick-or-treaters.

The store normally closes at 3 p.m. but will remain open until 6 p.m. for the celebration, giving families more time to visit.

Other participating locations include Johnny B's Burgers, Surf Rider Pizza and Whissel Beer Group. Central Congregational Church will offer a children's craft activity outside Whissel Beer Group, while the La Mesa Police Department is also listed among participants.

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Foothiller Footsteps — Grossmont High students earn retiree scholarships



FOOTHILLER FOOTSTEPS
Lynn and Connie Baer

In the fall, as we turn our thoughts to gratitude, this column celebrates scholarships funded by retirees or alumni in their honor. Here’s a list.

• **Jerry L. Lewis** \$ 1,000 Art Scholarship — **Sicabi Dillman Fernandez**

Jerry L. Lewis taught art at Grossmont High School for 30 years. An artist himself since 2020, Lewis has supported an outstanding art student to promote the arts and reward a senior who exemplifies a commitment to continuing a path in the arts after high school. This year, his widow, Carolyn Lewis, continues his legacy.

Carolyn Jungman, Visual Arts Department chair, said: “Fernandez’s work in the Career Technical Education — Arts Media Entertainment (CTE AME) Pathway was consistent, high quality, and thoughtful in her approach to projects. Fernandez is a stellar photographer who combines her love for photography and digital art in her AP portfolio by drawing imaginary worlds on top of photographs. She was recognized at the CTE Champion of Champions event as AME Champion for 2025–2026.”

• **Honoring George Gross** \$3,000 Memorial Scholarships — **Garrett Bowles and Natalia Cortes**

For 20 years, two scholarships have been awarded annually to college-bound Grossmont graduating seniors to honor the legacy of George C. Gross, a beloved teacher and mentor to Foothillers in the 1950s. The recipients “best complement a record of superior scholarship with an active concern for humanity.”

The dedicated administrators of the scholarships ended their stewardship with these words: “For all he gave us, we will always be grateful. Since its inception in 2007, the George C. Gross Memorial Scholarship — funded by Grossmont Alumni — distributed a total of \$58,000 to 26 outstanding students. The final awards of \$3,000 each were made in 2026.



Panagiota Georggin, \$5,000, and Sa Kyaw, \$2,500, earned the 2026 Jack Mashin Scholarships. (Photo courtesy of Grossmont High Yearbook staff)

Our thanks to all donors who made this 20-year program possible.”

• **Jack Mashin Athletic Scholarships** — Panagiota Georggin \$5,000 and Sa Kyaw \$2,500

In 1969, Jack Mashin, a beloved coach at Grossmont from 1923–1960, established the Jack Mashin Perpetual Athletic Scholarship Fund to aid worthy athletes in furthering their education through dedication and perseverance. The recipient must be a dedicated, but not necessarily outstanding, athlete. Four scholarships are awarded every year to district athletes. Each high school in the Grossmont UHS District may nominate one male and one female candidate for the scholarships.

Georggin was described by track and cross-country coach Ross Bartell as: “Having one of the best work ethics and highest commitment levels of any athlete I have coached in 22 years. Georggin earned the respect of all the coaches and athletes in our district because of the great sportsmanship and effort she exhibited during every competition.”

Wrestling coach and English teacher Todd Bell says about Kyaw: “Having worked with him in both an athletic and academic setting, he represents the kind of student-athlete every school hopes to develop. He will bring the same dedication, integrity, and work ethic to any opportunity he pursues.”

Obviously, the legacy of these retirees epitomizes the gratitude and hope for the future that these scholarships represent.

Grossmont High School Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays, Oct. 24, Nov. 21. Fridays by appointment. Contact: ghsmuseum@guhsd.net

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49					50	51			52		53	54
	56						57		58			59
					60				61			
						62					63	

- 22. Business symbol
- 25. Exclamation of surprise
- 26. Pouch
- 27. Individually
- 29. Satisfaction
- 31. The bill in a restaurant
- 34. Japanese delicacy
- 36. Port in southern Japan
- 37. Double-reed instruments
- 38. Center
- 40. “The Mount Rushmore State”
- 43. Soldier
- 45. Indicates position
- 48. Beauty treatment: ____-pedi
- 50. Nonsense (slang)
- 51. Republic of Ireland
- 53. Ballplayers’ tools
- 54. American state
- 55. Clusters of a fern frond
- 57. Patriotic women’s group
- 58. A person’s brother or sister
- 59. Breed of sheep
- 61. Of I

CLUES ACROSS

- 1. El Dorado High School
- 5. A sculpture representing a human or animal
- 11. A type of return
- 14. Tie the knot again
- 15. Washington city
- 18. Hairlike structures
- 19. Mark used over a vowel
- 21. Explosive
- 23. Popular 500 car race
- 24. Pile up
- 28. Currency
- 29. Commercial
- 30. A minute amount (Scottish)
- 32. Mass of fish eggs
- 33. Baseball stat
- 35. Licensed accountant
- 36. Japanese classical theater
- 39. Gasteyer and de Armas are two
- 41. Blood group
- 42. Assist in wrongdoing
- 44. Language of Cameroon
- 46. Grayish-white
- 47. A woolen cap of Scottish origin

CLUES DOWN

- 49. Microorganism
- 52. Strong social customs
- 56. Calm and dependable
- 58. Congressman
- 60. Force
- 62. As a result of this document
- 63. A main branch of Islam
- 1. Make a mistake
- 2. American DJ Rick
- 3. Fictional Asimov planet
- 4. Coughed out
- 5. Singing to one’s lover
- 6. Scotland’s longest river
- 7. One of the six noble gases
- 8. Body art
- 9. Two-toed sloth
- 10. Electronic counter-countermeasures
- 12. A foolish person
- 13. Of the wind
- 16. Mansion
- 17. Sound
- 20. English river

ANSWERS

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

V	I	H	S		A	B	E	E	E	H		
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N	I	O			S	S	V	W	V			
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	W	V	O		V	L		A	R	V	W	E
		E	C	N	V	R	V	E	d	V	E	R
		E	N	L	V	L	S		S	H	E	E

Highlanders celebrate homecoming with big win



Continuing the ‘Greek Out’ theme at Helix’s homecoming dance. (Photo by Leo Nguyen/Helix Charter High)



Helix students pose at the homecoming dance at the school. (Photo by Leo Nguyen/Helix Charter High)



Getting the crowd riled up during the homecoming game on Sept. 25. (Photo by Zoey Krzywicki/Helix Charter High)



Helix wide receiver leaps over Mater Dei Catholic defenders during the Highlanders 49–14 homecoming win on Sept. 25. (Photo by Leo Nguyen/Helix Charter High)



Helix students having fun at the homecoming dance held at the school on Sept. 26. (Photo by Lavy Pham/Helix Charter High)



Helix students on the school’s homecoming court are (from left) Jayden Avery, Matt Bargaenquast, Ryder Hathaway Hubele, Clover Momsen, Griffin Robertson, Trinity Bush, Natasha ‘Tashi’ Gill, Noelle Graham Johnson, Kima Okunor, and Logan McMahon. (Photo by Lavy Pham/Helix Charter High)



Students during the ‘Greek Out’ at the homecoming game are (from left) Sibonay Guevara, Eli Joseph, Logan McMahon, Sage Bos, Zoe Deer, Gray Crockett, Kate Weaver, Gus Cloyd, Ellery Goldberg, Andres Venancio, and Tristan Ramos. (Photo by Zoey Krzywicki/Helix Charter High)

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Helix cheerleaders perform during the homecoming game win. (Photo by Leo Nguyen/Helix Charter High)

In 75th year, Helix Charter High School to hold first Highland Games

By DREW SITTON
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — Helix Charter High School is closing out its 75th anniversary year with a new event: A Highland Games.

Helix, with its tartan graduation cloth and bagpipe band, pulls many aspects of Scottish culture into the La Mesa school thanks to its mascot, The Highlanders. The idea for a Highland Games had been raised for a while, but the 75th anniversary was important enough that school administrators finally focused on founding a festival they hope will become an annual tradition.

“This is something that people have always wanted to do here,” explained Lauren Knuth, community relations liaison for Helix. “We are the Highlanders.”

The Highland Games are to Scots what the Olympics are to Greeks. With Celtic roots, the games are a heavy athletic competition focusing on strength tests. The high school will have the junior version of the games — no actual tossing of telephone poles in the Caber Toss. Events include a kilted dash, tug-of-war, stone put and Weight for Distance.

Already, 450 people have signed up for the Oct. 24 event from those who compete nationally in Highland Games to high school athletes. It is not just limited to sports teams and alumni groups.

“We wanted it to be an event that included the entire community, so that neighbors and La Mesa community members could attend,” Knuth said.

Watching feats of strength isn’t the only reason to attend. The event will also have guided tours of the campus, a car show, food stands, a festival area with booths for alumni of each decade, lawn games for children, Highland dance demonstrations and bagpipe band performances.

“I’m excited for the Highland Games because it gives us an opportunity to bring together students, staff, alumni, families and community members to celebrate 75 years of Helix serving the community,” said Helix Executive Director Kevin Osborne in a statement. “I’m especially looking forward to seeing different generations of Highlanders reconnect, have some fun, and celebrate the traditions and sense of community that have made Helix such a special place for so many years.”



Helix High School’s iconic bagpipe band still performs. (Photo courtesy Helix High School)

The event will be a major gathering for graduates dating back to the school’s founding.

“I am excited to share what a great school Helix is and how important it is to give back to our school community,” said Judy Mitchell Kirk, a 1972 alum and retired staff member who heads the Helix Foundation.

The mascot Highlanders came about as the polar opposite of Helix’s lifetime rival, Grossmont High School, whose mascot is the Foothillers.

La Mesa and the surrounding communities saw their population double around the time of World War II so residents needed a new high school. In 1951, Helix began

HIGHLAND GAMES

When: Saturday, Oct. 24 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Attendees are asked to bring chairs and blankets for seating.

Where: Helix Lower Fields (by the baseball and softball fields).

Info: For a full schedule, visit helixcharter.net/about-us/75-anniversary

mid-year, with half of Grossmont’s student body automatically enrolled in the new school. That abrupt beginning kicked off the forever rivalry between the two schools.

Helix was a strong school for many years, until falling to become one of the worst performing schools in the county.

“In the 1990s, everything changed for us,” Knuth said. “We found ourselves with the lowest performance scores, the lowest graduation rates.”

School administrators finally settled on a solution, converting from a public school in the Grossmont Union High School District into a charter school in 1998.

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