Council reverses course: Retail spaces can be turned into offices

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In-person education restarts for small groups of students

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Enjoy local takeout, delivery and outdoor dining options
Campuses reopen for high-need students

For small groups of Palo Alto students, class is in — in person
by Elena Kadvany

The school district reopened several campuses for the first time since March to serve students who have been identified as struggling academically or needing quiet, supportive places to learn, as well as some students with disabilities. In one Fletcher Middle School classroom, five students sat quietly at socially distanced desks working on computers with masks and headphones on. Before entering the classroom, each of them had been screened by a nurse who’d asked if they’d been in contact with anyone who’s tested positive for the coronavirus or if they had symptoms themselves. Instead of back-to-school-night flyers, QR codes for health screenings were posted at the front office.

Each day, the students are provided with breakfast, which they eat outside with their cohorts at picnic tables and benches marked with blue tape to remind them to keep 6 feet apart. The hallways are decorated with illustrated hand-washing reminders and the water fountains are wrapped in plastic. For small groups of Palo Alto Unified School District students still went back to school in person last week.

The family parks in one place as jobs are precious commodities. When staff heard two weeks ago of students in RVs who were living on El Camino Real, they were asked if they’d been in contact with anyone who’s tested positive for the coronavirus or if they had symptoms themselves. Instead of back-to-school-night flyers, QR codes for health screenings were posted at the front office. Each day, the students are provided with breakfast, which they eat outside with their cohorts at picnic tables and benches marked with blue tape to remind them to keep 6 feet apart. The hallways are decorated with illustrated hand-washing reminders and the water fountains are wrapped in plastic.

When the new school year started, the four Solorio siblings — a kindergartner, sixth-grader, eighth-grader and high school sophomore — sat in a circle in their family’s cramped RV, parked on El Camino Real across the street from the Palo Alto school district’s office, and tried to focus on online school. But with four computers sharing one hot spot, all of which were provided to the family by the district, the internet connection often slowed or disconnected, and they were unable to finish classes. Their mother, Noemi Solorio, doesn’t speak much English but would do her best to make sure her kids were focused and engaged, especially her youngest one, who’s never attended school before. When buses drive by on El Camino Real, the RV shakes. Without electricity, charged computer and cell phone batteries are precious commodities. The family parks in one place as long as they can before a police officer inevitably shows up and leaves them a tow warning notice that gives them 72 hours to move the RV a half mile away or face an expensive citation.

The children in the Solorio family are among a small number of homeless students in Palo Alto Unified — 23, according to the district — whose living situations bring to light deep inequities at play with distance learning. When staff heard two weeks ago of students in RVs who were struggling to access the internet consistently, even with the district-provided hot spots, they installed wireless access points outside the district office and pointed them toward the motor homes on El Camino Real.

As part of the district’s new PAUSD+ program for high-need students, each middle and high school campus is housing one or two cohorts, with no more than two adults supervising each group. Fletcher, for example, is currently serving 15 middle school students in two cohorts. Out of the 91 students whom...
QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“It’s hard for me to see how getting rid of a retail ordinance will try to help retail.”

— Eric Fiseth, Palo Alto City Council member, on repealing the city’s ‘retail protection’ law. See story on page 7.

Around Town

TREATING THE COVID BLUES — As shelter-at-home orders have dramatically increased social interactions in person, one local teenager is looking to help people feel more connected — while also building bridges across generations. Palo Alto High School student Jan Hyuk Kwak’s project, TalkTheGap, brings together young people and senior citizens to exchange stories virtually through an online talk show that launched Aug. 12 and posts new episodes once or twice a week. Some of the episodes feature interviews by Kwak, with an older person who shares advice for younger people. In the first episode to introduce the series, Kwak, 17, opened up about his own experience with COVID-19. “The thing about being in self-isolation is it’s boring. You don’t get to interact with anyone in your family,” he said, adding his experience with the virus wasn’t as bad as others. One episode featured Michael “Mike” Crow, a cowboy from Texas who has practiced team roping for about 35-40 years, where he learned the importance of a positive attitude and building a strong work ethic. “Young people are very smart, but still you do have to stay close to your family and remember where you came from,” he said. In an episode posted Tuesday, Bobbie Coleman, 92, describes what it was like being a teenager during World War II. She also offered this piece of advice: “Practice the love that you have in your heart. Together, we can accomplish anything.” To learn more about the project, visit talkthegap.com.

MAKE A WISH — At a time when the world seems to be facing insurmountable challenges, community groups in Palo Alto and East Palo Alto are coming together to help locals find hope. Officials from both cities, several organizations have partnered to create wishing trees. The project is based on a concept first introduced in 1996 by artist Yoko Ono. John Lennon’s widow, who was inspired by wishing trees in Japan’s temples. Ono created an exhibit where she set up a tree for people to write a wish for peace and tie it to the tree. Since then, the project has expanded throughout the world. In 2009, Ono visited Stanford University, where two “Wish Trees” were installed on campus, according to a Stanford Report article. The current local project, which runs through Oct. 31, follows the same concept. After October, the wishes will be sent to the Imagine Peace Tower Wishing Well in Viðey, Iceland, to join other wishes shared elsewhere in the world. Eight wishes trees are set up locally, including at Cubberly Community Center and the Palo Alto Art Center in Palo Alto and the Ravenswood Family Health Center and Bell Street Park in East Palo Alto. A map of the locations and more information on the project can be found at canopy.org/wishing-trees. Wishes can also be shared online on Facebook at facebook.com/ groups/wishingtrees or through social media posts that include the hashtag #CommunityWishingTrees.

SWEET GIG — The Palo Alto City Council fell into familiar political camps on Monday as it was choosing a new member for the Human Relations Commission, which is charged with overseeing issues relating to diversity, inclusivity, social services and police policies. Council members were selecting between six applicants for a single vacancy on the commission. After none of the candidates secured the needed four votes to get an appointment in the first round of voting, council members found themselves split between Nilofer Chollapart, a clinical research specialist, and Sunil de Tourreil, an entrepreneur whose business, The Chocolate Garage, operated in downtown between 2010 and 2018. As is often the case on commission appointments, council members voted blocs. Vice Mayor Tom DuBois and council members Eric Fiseth and Lydia Kou all supported Chollapart, while Mayor Adrian Fine and council member Alison Cormack, Liz Kissin and Greg Tanaka all voted for Tourreil in the second round of voting, giving her the edge. There was less suspense when it came to appointments to the Public Art Commission, where incumbent Commissioners Nia Taylor and Hsinia Shen garnered six and four votes, respectively, and will stay on until May 31, 2023.
Want to get to know your local candidates? Plenty of election debates and forums are scheduled

**Palo Alto Weekly to host City Council debate on Thursday, Sept. 24**

*by Embarcadero Media staff*

Palo Alto and East Palo Alto voters will not only cast their ballots this fall for the country’s next leader but also for city and school candidates who could make a long-term impact on their communities.

On Thursday, Sept. 24, from 7 to 9 p.m., the Palo Alto Weekly will host a debate of the 10 candidates for Palo Alto City Council, a field that includes two incumbent candidates, four current or former commissioners, one former council member and three first-time contenders. Moderated by the Palo Alto Weekly Editor Jocelyn Dong and City Hall reporter Gennady Sheyner, the virtual event, held on Zoom, will include questions from the public. To submit a question for consideration, email editor@paweekly.com. Register at PaloAltoOnline.com/paucsd.

Here’s a list of other local election debates and forums taking place virtually in the coming weeks.

**Palo Alto City Council**

- **Tuesday, Sept. 22, 7:30-8:30 p.m.** Forum with candidate Raven Malone. Hosted by the Southgate Women’s Group. For information, and to view the Southgate Women’s Group videos of other candidates’ interviews, go to southgate-women.com.
- **Tuesday, Sept. 29, 7:30-8:30 p.m.** Forum with candidate Steven Lee. Hosted by the Southgate Women’s Group. For information, go to southgatewomen.com.
- **Thursday, Oct. 1, 7-7:9 p.m.** Forum via Zoom on policing, traffic, housing, and development among other topics. Hosted by Palo Alto Neighborhoods. Moderated by former Councilwoman Hillary Freeman. Event will be broadcast on Cable TV Channel 28 and streamed live at midpenmedia.org. Those wishing to participate via Zoom can do so by dialing 669-891-7933 and entering meeting ID 838 7483 0135. Passcode for the event is 057302. For information, go to paneighborhoods.org.
- **Sunday, Oct. 4, 4-5:30 p.m.** Green Transportation Forum hosted by Walk Bike Palo Alto and the Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition. Moderator is Robert Neff, a member of the Palo Alto Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee. Register for virtual forum on pattransportforum.eventbrite.com.

Registered attendees will be provided with the Zoom link starting one week before the event.

- **Tuesday, Oct. 6, 7-7:9 p.m.** Forum on issues that impact the environment. Moderated by the Rev. Kaloma Smith, chair of the Palo Alto Human Relations Commission. Hosted by 350SV Palo Alto Climate team and cosponsored by 12 local environmental organizations. Register at eventbrite.com by searching for “Palo Alto climate forum.” A link to the webinar will be provided to registrants. Questions can be sent by email to 350svpaloalto@gmail.com.
- **Thursday, Oct. 8, 6-8 p.m.** Forum on affordable housing. COVID-19 recovery efforts and calls for racial equality with candidates split between two one-hour sessions on Zoom. Hosted by SV@Home Action Fund and cosponsored by California YIMBY. Register at bit.ly/3GKYHij.
- **Saturday, Oct. 10, 4-6 p.m.** Forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of Palo Alto and cosponsored by the Palo Alto City Council. Questions can be sent in advance by noon on Tuesday, Oct. 6, through the submission link on registration confirmation email.
- **Saturday, Oct. 17, 7-3 p.m.** Forum on Educational Equity and Access: the Achievement Gap and More. Event, jointly sponsored by PTA Council of PTAs, Palo Alto Community

(continued on page 14)

**To combat vacancies, Palo Alto may repeal ‘retail protection’ law**

Council spars over proposal to eliminate ordinance that bans ground-level retail spaces from becoming offices

*by Gennady Sheyner*

With Palo Alto businesses hunkered down during the economic shutdown, a bitterly divided City Council took an initial step on Monday toward repealing a local law that bars the conversion of ground-floor retail spaces to offices throughout the city.

In a surprising move that followed a long and wide-ranging debate about strategies to support the business community, the council directed staff by a 4-3 vote to return with an ordinance that would eliminate the citywide “retail preservation” ordinance. If the council moves ahead with the repeal, properties outside Palo Alto’s main commercial areas would be allowed to replace retail operations with offices or other commercial uses.

The controversial proposal was made by Mayor Adrian Fine, a longtime critic of the ordinance, who argued that the law is too geographically broad. His three colleagues who favor more city growth, Alison Cormack, Liz Kniss and Greg Tanaka, all supported the consideration of the repeal. The three council members who are more aligned with “residentalist” philosophies, Vice Mayor Tom DuBois, Eric Filseth and Lydia Kou, vehemently opposed the move and suggested that the change could cause long-term damage to the retail community.

The council adopted the law in 2017 as a “retail protection” proposal and relocation of several longtime retail businesses and to not dictate to us what they’re looking for on their site versus what we want our city to become,” Kou said. “I don’t think it’s the right thing to do.”

The council similarly split 4-3 on a proposal by Fine to relax parking rules for businesses when they change use. He pointed to the example of the Palo Alto Baking Company, a California Avenue bakery that shut down at the end of 2018 and which has not been replaced. The challenge, he said, is that potential retailers are unable to provide the extra parking that is required of them.

“Especially in a year where I don’t think parking is the highest concern, we may be looking at temporarily suspending that,” Fine said.

Other proposals to support the business community proved far less divisive. DuBois suggested exploring ways to greatly enhance COVID-19 testing, providing support for child care and coming up with strategies for holiday shopping in primary commercial areas. The council adopted all three proposals with little debate.

The council also agreed not to move forward with the proposal that would have come out from the business community, including reducing minimum wage, decreasing

(continued on page 10)
COMMUNITY

Erickson: Youth mental health is still a work in progress

Retiring head of Youth Community Services takes stock of the city’s progress on empowerment of youth and the remaining challenges

by Sue Dremann

A fter 21 years working with Youth Community Services, first as a parent volunteer and then for 16 years as the nonprofit organization’s executive director, Leif Erickson has watched Palo Alto’s youth and their relationship to their community evolve.

When he took over the role, he shepherded a movement toward empowering the city’s youth to voice their feelings during the most challenging of times, two suicide clusters that began in 2009. Through volunteer service programs and leadership building, he and Youth Community Services (YCS) helped the city’s students find meaning and connection in a community where they felt isolated and ignored — feelings they’d reported in the 2010 Developmental Assets Survey, which polled more than 4,000 Palo Alto Unified School District students.

As he retires from his position — former Executive Director of Blossom Birth & Family Mara Oommen stepped into the role on July 1 — Erickson reflected on the changes and challenges facing today’s youth. Those challenges still run deep, even as the community has made great strides, he said.

The city’s young people are navigating some of the nation’s — and the world’s — most fearsome conundrums: the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of unprecedented climate change, a socially and politically divisive civic landscape and deep questions about racial and economic equality, he said.

But youth are stepping up to attempt to meet the challenges, creating peer leadership groups and reaching out to each other and finding meaning in working together and in the community through service projects, he said.

Erickson has seen the organization evolve since it was founded 30 years ago.

“There was an increase in concern and focus on youth mental health and wellness” since he took over the leadership, he said.

YCS has also emphasized increased connections between students of different racial, economic and ethnic backgrounds by bringing together Palo Alto, East Palo Alto and Menlo Park students to work collaboratively, he said.

“Service to others is a gateway asset that leads to other positive experiences” and addresses isolation, depression and anxiety, he said. Through service projects, young people interact with religious and civic organizations, older and younger generations and other groups who provide them with meaningful personal experiences and positive feedback.

One of the most positive changes he’s seen is a greater willingness for adults to listen to youth. The students’ 2010 Development Assets report card on the community was “kind of a shock,” he said. One of the lowest scores, especially among high school students, was the sense of community values. Many felt ignored....
Palo Alto looks to new zoning tool to relieve housing drought

Council considers what type of housing should be required in exchange for zoning concessions

by Gennady Sheyner

The city is not on target to meet its Comprehensive Goal of producing between 3,545 and 4,420 new housing units by 2030. The council agreed that 20% of the units in proposed developments would need to be affordable housing, which is higher than the city’s normal 15% requirement for new residential developments. The council left unanswered, however, the question of affordability when it comes to the new housing units. Some on the council, including Kou, argued that setting the limit at the high end of the area’s median income will not produce the type of housing that the city really wants. She proposed in February that these projects be required to provide housing at 50% of the area’s median income level. Others, including Tanaka, raised concerns that imposing stringent affordability requirements would discourage applicants from coming forward. He also argued that raising the percentage of income-restricted units could result in fewer proposals.

“The lack of housing affordable at all income levels contributes to other impacts experienced in Palo Alto,” the report states. “These impacts relate to traffic congestion, higher vehicle miles traveled, greater greenhouse gas emissions, and diminished housing opportunities, among other quality of life issues.”

To gain some clarity on the issue of affordability, staff is proposing numerous options for the council’s consideration. Under one proposed option, the 20% requirement would be split among...
utility rates and opposing Proposition 15, which would create a “split roll” system in which property tax for commercial and industrial sites is based on market value rather than purchase price.

Despite the assertion by some business owners that the proposition would hurt them financially, the City Council endorsed staff recommendation that the city officially support Proposition 15, which allocates some of the property tax revenues to local governments and school districts.

DuBois also vehemently opposed any consideration of lowering the minimum wage, an idea that was brought up by Jim Ellis, managind principal of Ellis Partners, which owns Town & Country Village. DuBois said reducing wages would be “somewhat immoral right now.”

“We’re talking about workers who are on the front lines — people at grocery stores and the other stores. They should probably be getting combat pay and getting paid more. I just can’t see us lowering their wage,” DuBois said.

The council largely supported most of the other efforts by staff to support local retail, which includes $10,000 grants to small businesses and the closure of University and California avenues to traffic as part of the city’s Uplift Local campaign (previously known as Summer Streets). So far, the efforts appear to be having positive, if uneven effects, with some restaurants along the main commercial stretches reporting a healthy uptick in businesses while others, particularly those on side streets, saying that the closures are hurting their business by putting them at a competitive disadvantage.

For Town & Country, the challenge of the pandemic is compounded by the fact that many of its shoppers used to come from Palo Alto High School and Stanford University, institutions that have been more or less shut down for the past six months. Ellis said sales at the shopping center are down this month by 60% to 80% when compared to last year. And while the shopping center went into the pandemic with a vacancy rate of between 6% and 7%, the rate currently stands at 15% and appears to be heading toward 20% to 25%.

“It’s important to acknowledge that many of these businesses won’t open,” Ellis said. “And it isn’t because the landlord won’t talk to them and isn’t willing to defer, abate or rework their rent. It’s because they’ve been closed for such an extended period of time, and they are really — even though general retail businesses are open — unable to receive customers.”

Staff Writer Gennady Sheyner can be emailed at gsheyner@paweekly.com.

RVs (continued from page 5)

Jose before arriving in Palo Alto in February, just before the start of the pandemic. Noemi Solorio said in an interview conducted in Spanish. She was working in the food industry at the time. She worked in the afternoons while her husband worked in the mornings so at least one parent could be home with their children throughout the day.

Then shelter in place took effect. Her husband got laid off and her hours were cut. She later lost her job, but her husband found work again. They don’t own the RV that’s become their home but instead pay $700 a month in rent to the owner. She said those early months of the shutdown were “chaos” without the escape of a trip to the park or McDonald’s.

Solorio’s full-time job is now sitting with her youngest son, Jeremy, while he’s on Zoom for school from 8 to 11:30 a.m. He didn’t attend preschool, so she hasn’t had any exposure to school and is having trouble adjusting, particularly with everything happening online. He’s 5 years old and easily distracted — by his siblings, by his hunger, by wanting to kiss and hug his mother.

“It’s his first year. He doesn’t know there’s a year?” she asked.

Solorio said it’s been frustrating to see some of her children get marked absent or penalized when they lose their internet connection and miss class. She said she wished there was more flexibility and communication with the teachers about their living situation. (She also asked for more compassion from the city about people living in RVs, who she feels are painted with an unfairly broad brush.)

The mother of four compared the foundation laid at the start of a new school year — and with Jeremy, the start of his K-12 education — to starting the day with a good breakfast. Without one, you’re not well set up for success, she said. She said she wished to see some of her children get absences。“It does worry me.”

Last week, Solorio’s two older children, who are 13 and 15 years old, returned to school in person for the first time since March as part of the district’s new PAUSD+ program for high-need students. She had mixed feelings about them going.

“I’m happy but nervous. I’m happy because due to the situation I’m living in, they were not doing all of their classes completely. It’s not a problem with them. It’s a problem with the power and not being able to charge their computers, she said. “But I’m nervous because I know the coronavirus is something serious.”

As a mother, she said she’d prefer to keep her children home with her where she knows they’re safe and can limit their exposure to the coronavirus. When her husband comes home from work, he disinfects as much as possible and leaves his shoes outside the RV.

They can’t help but feel inadequate as parents, Solorio said, and are “fighting” to find a stable home to move into. Last week, the district told them they’d get a second hot spot, a request that takes about a week to process, though the district is prioritizing homeless students.

“We feel like bad parents. We want a good roof above our heads,” she said. “But at the same time I thank God because I still have a roof for them and they’re healthy.”

The school district is planning to pilot an elementary PAUSD+ program at Addison Elementary School but is hoping to be able to fully reopen elementary campuses next month and into early November, assuming Santa Clara County stays in the state’s less restrictive “red” tier for two weeks.

Staff Writer Elena Kadvany can be emailed at ekadvany@paweekly.com.
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Air hugs and weekly testing: Inside one private school’s first day back at school

Synapse School in Menlo Park is holding in-person classes outdoors on its campus

by Elena kadavy

A t a glance, it looked like a normal first day of school: Kids climbed excitedly onto a jungle gym, a teacher led story time, a group of fourth-graders went over classroom expectations for the year.

It was far from normal. All the students and staff had been privately tested for the coronavirus before being allowed to return to campus. Classes were being held under tents in parking lots and in storage spaces converted into outdoor or open-air classrooms. One teacher led her class remotely from a screen as she quarantined at home after traveling for a family emergency. Kindergarten teachers, on their first-ever day of in-person school, were learning about “air hugs” and using “airplane arms” to stay 6 feet apart.

Synapse School, a small private school in Menlo Park, is one of 21 San Mateo County schools that have been able to reopen for in-person learning for elementary grades. Wednesday was its first day of the new school year (the restaurant reopenings were delayed by two days because of poor air quality). Only schools with waivers are allowed to reopen until San Mateo County’s COVID-19 metrics are low enough to gain the state’s permission for all schools to reconvene.

Synapse offers a unique look into how small and well-resourced schools— one with ample resources and a reputation for being scrap-y and innovative—has approached re-opening the campus to educate students outdoors.

“Schools can do this—maybe not this robustly. We’re small. We have some resources,” Head of School Jim Eagen acknowledged. “If you’re a smaller school and you can think creatively, I do think you can get to a spot where you can open safely.”

Synapse, which was born as a lab school in 2009, offers project-based instruction with a focus on social-emotional learning and neuroscience research (hence the name). Students don’t receive letter grades and are instead assessed on concepts like risk, communication and creativity. The campus is turned into a “living museum” displaying students’ interactive projects based on an annual project. This year’s project ranges from $32,000 for kindergarten to $38,000 for middle school, plus fees.

Elementary school students returned in person this week in a hybrid model. Stable cohorts of eight to 12 kindergarten through fourth-graders are at the Edison Way campus in the morning, then head home for distance learning in the afternoon. Cohorts of the same size of fifth- and sixth-graders who learn remotely in the morning attend in person in the afternoon, after the campus gets a deep clean during lunchtime. About 80% to 85% of students in these grades have returned; the rest have opted for full distance learning, according to the school.

All students and staff are being tested weekly on campus through what Eagen said is a cutting-edge research partnership. Synapse, which has an existing partnership with Stanford through the school’s Brainwave Learning Center, is working with the university and children’s hospital for a study on COVID-19 diagnostics and the safety reopening of schools. The goal is to bring researchers and doctors who provide the testing under a tent in a school parking lot every Thursday, Synapse raised money and dished into the school’s rainy day fund—and “it’s raining really right now,” Eagen said—to create a fund that the hospital can use as “they see fit to help reopen schools.”

The testing is led by Yvonne Maldonado, a Stanford pediatric infectious disease professor and the infection control medical director at Packard, and Jason Wang, associate pediatrics professor at the children’s hospital. Both have been consulting with the school on its reopening plans since June, as have medical experts from the University of California at San Francisco.

Students and staff who opt to participate in the study (as well as this newspaper’s reporter and photographer, who were tested before being allowed to visit Synapse) undergo three different kinds of COVID-19 testing: a nasopharyngeal swab (deep in the nose), lower nasal swab and saliva sample, which are analyzed at the Stanford University Clinical Virology Laboratory. The school promises a 48-hour turnaround for results.

There have been no positive tests yet, Eagen said, but the school has acknowledged that “even with the best control strategies in place, there may be cases in our community.”

Synapse asks students and families to adhere to a set of guidelines that assess the risk levels of various off-campus activities, such as socializing, going for a hike or dining at restaurants. Testing is just one layer of Synapse’s reopening strategy, which also includes frequent cleaning of spaces, physical distancing, handwashing, upgrading HVAC units and requiring all students and staff to wear masks while on campus. Audits of classrooms and field trips have been put on hold and events like back to school night and all-school assemblies will take place online.

The 2-acre campus itself has been transformed to serve students mostly outside based on research that shows the coronavirus doesn’t transmit as easily outdoors, Eagen said. To create outdoor classrooms, the school purchased Wi-Fi hotspots, put down turf on parking lots, purchased large tents and built new desks and whiteboards in a campus makerspace. A multipurpose room has been turned into two first-grade classrooms, with new carpet that has yellow designs that double as social distancing markers. The few classes that are meeting indoors are in spaces with large air flow.

“We took down walls,” Eagen said. “That’s our school’s approach. We’re a very innovative lab school, young and scrappy. Our parents expect that, actually.”

In one fourth-grade classroom, a converted storage space, students discussed on Wednesday morning norms for both usual and unusual school years: Be kind. Try your best. Be respectful—particularly when considering that some of their peers are now learning in tents without walls where noise travels easily.

Inside the school’s maker space, a massive warehouse with high ceilings and large doors that can roll up to increase air flow, a group of kindergarten students wore “first day on campus” paper hats as they drew and colored using pens in Ziploc bags designated for individual use.

Eagen said transparent, frequent communication with parents and staff was key to a successful reopening. Synapse hosted weekly Zoom town halls and posted weekly videos, plus a weekly newsletter. He met individually with each of the school’s 60 staff members, either outside from a distance or on Zoom. The staff also met with the school’s medical advisers, COVID-19 task force and board members.

A few non-teaching employees didn’t feel comfortable returning to work in person, Eagen said, while some who did want to come back were asked to stay at home. Art and music specialists, for example, who normally rotate among classrooms are working from home for their safety and the students’.

Eagen estimated that Synapse will spend close to $2 million from the school’s reserves on reopening, including facilities upgrades, testing and adding staff. He acknowledged that not all schools can do this, “but you can do it. You can make changes. You can just keep things small.”

But there are less costly approaches that other schools can apply, he said, including better communication, forming partnerships and, practically, repurposing a campus’ outdoor spaces.

“A big district can communicate transparently. They can reach out to experts, whether they’re within their own community, the parent population, or the broader community. They can partner on best practices,” Eagen said.

Staff Writer Elena Kadavy can be emailed at ekadvany@paweeekly.com.

about the cover: Synapse School teacher Paige Carey plays a game with her students on the first day of in-person classes in Menlo Park on Sept. 16.

(continued on page 13)
to take a more cautious, “con-
servative” approach, citing their concerns about the health and safety risks.

“It’s best for them to be back,” Futures teacher Coleman Hall said on Friday. The students, despite often having behavioral issues, have been calm since re-
turning to school, he added.

He was busy planning numer-
ous activities that underscore the importance of in-person learn-
ing for these students, including grocery shopping, use of public transportation and hiking — all geared toward helping the stu-
dents become “as independent as
possible,” Hall said.

There are 21 post-secondary students now attending school in
person, according to the district.

The school district has not yet announced a date that more special-education students will return in person, but it will be
this month, Superintendent Don Austin said. The district is con-
ing to negotiate working con-
ditions related to special educa-
tion with the teachers union, with three bargaining sessions in the last week.

All of the in-person programs must adhere to the state Public Health Department’s guidelines, including stable cohorts of 14 or fewer students who stay to-
gether for all activities and physi-
cal distancing “balanced with
developmental and socio-emo-
tional needs of the age group.”

Judy Argumedo, the district’s direc-
tor of academic support pro-
grams, said she wasn’t surprised to hear students were more en-
gaged in online learning while back at their schools in a more structured environment.

“I think physically just being on
the campus puts you in the
mindset: You walk on the cam-
pus and you’re expected to be
engaged,” she said. “School is
such a wrapper, protective
service that I don’t think people in general understood everything that school provides — even the building itself.”

YCS can “continue to build in
protection factors of positive, ser-
vice-based experiences and posi-
tive activities across generations
that are an antidote to suicide and depression,” he said. Look-
ning back over the years and the
organization’s accomplishments, he said: “I have so much respect for our community and the way it supports YCS.”

Youth Community Services will celebrate its 30th anniversary, hon-
or Erickson and introduce Oom-
men on Zoom on Thursday, Sept.
24, 5:30-6:30 p.m. Anyone who
would like to attend the virtual event can RSVP for the Zoom link at youthcommunitysersvice.org. ■

Staff Writer Sue Dremann
can be emailed at sdremann@
paweweekly.com.

For article text, see: http://paweweekly.com.

* Upfront *
Ravenswood (continued from page 5)

for about 580 children. Families of about 250 students wanted to sign up for the hubs in the first days they were advertised, according to the district.

In the short term, Ravenswood is hoping to serve 140 students across all of the learning hubs and, in the long term, accommodate more than 200 students, Superintendent Gina Sudaria told the Weekly.

The learning hubs are open during school hours, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., at Los Robles-McNair and Cesar Chavez Ravenswood Middle School.

“The learning hubs not only help the student, it helps the families be able to carry on and sustain their household,” Sudaria said during a Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula webinar on Wednesday evening. “Students are able to come into a safe place, access Wi-Fi and … (have) some accountability. There’s an adult in the room who’s there to not only respond to you emotionally as a child but to help academically when you get stuck, making sure you’re on time and helping academically when you get stuck, making sure you’re actually carrying on with the work during that asynchronous work.”

Boys & Girls, for its hub, is overseeing three classrooms of kindergarten and first-grade students at Los Robles-McNair. Each classroom has a stable cohort of no more than 10 students from the same school — Los Robles, Costano or Belle Haven — and two Boys & Girls employees, who all volunteered for this particular assignment. The students have their temperatures checked and are screened for COVID-19 symptoms and exposure daily (as were this reporter and photographer when they visited). They sit at socially distanced desks and wear masks. Only one student can go to the bathroom at a time, and they stop at a “sanitation station” to use hand sanitizer when they return to the classroom. The staff use an incentive program to keep the students safe and on track, giving them points for properly wearing masks or staying on task during Zoom classes.

Boys & Girls staff said they were eager to leverage their resources to meet a need in the community as schools remain closed and many students continue to struggle with internet access, having a quiet space to learn or simply focus on Zoom classes. The Ravenswood Unified School District has a few learning hubs for about 250 students.

Spencer Haar, site leader for the Boys & Girls hub at Los Robles-McNair, said parents have been “thankful” when dropping their kids off. Parents are not allowed to come on the campuses, a particular disappointment for the parents who wanted to watch their kindergarten friends have their first-ever in-person classroom experience.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula also opened three of its own learning hubs this week: one at the nonprofit’s East Palo Alto clubhouse on Pulgas Avenue and two in Redwood City. On Wednesday morning at the East Palo Alto hub, which is next door to Los Robles-McNair, about 17 students of all ages were learning online, sitting at socially distanced tables set up in the parking lot outside the clubhouse.

The children are happy to be around other children, staff said. One young boy started crying at the end of the day on Tuesday because he didn’t want to leave school.

“It’s nice for them to see other kids,” said Jenny Obiaya, chief program officer for the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula. “It can be such an isolating time.”

Boys & Girls hopes its Ravenswood hub will eventually accommodate more students. One barrier for working parents, however, is transportation. Three sisters who started in the learning hub earlier this week had to drop out, Haar said, because their mother couldn’t pick them up in the afternoons. He said they’re hoping the district can provide transportation to students who need it.

The Ravenswood school board approved last Thursday memoranda of understandings with the three nonprofits. Board member Sharifa Wilson cast the sole “no” vote, citing concerns about whether the nonprofit staff working at the hubs will be regularly tested for the coronavirus.

“The district has allocated $750,000 to support the learning hubs from $3 million it received in federal funds to mitigate students’ learning losses. The funds expire at the end of the year, so the district will look to the three nonprofits to pay to continue the hubs if schools remain closed into 2021.

With other organizations managing the hubs, the district will be able to learn from what works and what doesn’t.

“We want to be able to provide direct instruction and bring kids back,” Sudaria said Wednesday.

“We want to do so in a safe way and we think the learning hubs (are) a way to be able to launch and play out what it will be like to have kids on campus.”

The learning hubs are open to any Ravenswood school district student families who are interested in applying for a spot at a learning hub can do so here: https://sites.google.com/ravenswood-schools.net/reopeningplanning/learning-hubs.

Other local nonprofits have stepped in to support Ravenswood students who are struggling with distance learning. East Palo Alto education nonprofit Thiebaut Method started a new online learning program using volunteers to teach Ravenswood students how to use distance technologies, with a list of students waiting to sign up. All Students Matter, which prepares placed volunteers in Ravenswood classrooms to provide support, is now using volunteers to provide one-on-one virtual tutoring to students. Both organizations are looking for more volunteers so they can serve more students.

Costano Elementary School kindergartner Matthias follows schedules on a whiteboard in a classroom at the Boys & Girls Clubs in East Palo Alto on Sept. 16.

Debate (continued from page 7)

Advisory Committee for Special Education, the Latino Parent Network and Parent Advocates for Special Education. For more information, go to ptc.paloaltopta.org. Questions can be sent by email to paloaltocac@gmail.com.

Ravenswood City School District Board of Trustees

• Saturday, Oct. 3, 1-4 p.m. Forum hosted by EPA Neighbors at St. Mark AME Church, 1749 Bay Road, East Palo Alto. More information on registration and access to come.

• Thursday, Oct. 8, 7-8 p.m. Forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of South San Mateo County over Zoom. More information on registration and access to come.

Santa Clara County Board of Education, Area 1

• Sunday, Oct. 11, 4-5 p.m. Forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of Los Altos-Mountain View Area. If event registration exceeds 100 attendees, organizers plan to provide a livestream via YouTube. Registration information is posted at lwvlamv.org. Attendees can submit a question in advance.

California Senate District 13

• Thursday, Sept. 24, 7-8 p.m. Forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of Los Altos-Mountain View Area and cosponsored by LWV chapters in Palo Alto, Cupertino-Sunnyvale and South San Mateo County. If event registration exceeds 100 attendees, organizers plan to provide a livestream via YouTube. Registration link at lwvlamv.org.

California Assembly District 24

• Tuesday, Sept. 29, 7:30-8:30 p.m. Forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of Palo Alto and cosponsored by LWV chapters in Los Altos-Mountain View Area, Cupertino-Sunnyvale and South San Mateo County. Registration link at lwvlamv.org. Questions can be sent in advance by noon on Sunday, Sept. 27, through the question submission link on registration confirmation email.

U.S. Congressional District 18

• Saturday, Sept. 26, 4-5 p.m. Forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of Palo Alto and cosponsored by LWV chapters in Los Altos-Mountain View Area, Southwest Santa Clara Valley and South San Mateo County. Registration link at lwvlamv.org. Questions can be sent in advance by noon on Thursday, Sept. 24, through the question submission link on registration confirmation email.
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**Pulse**

A weekly compendium of vital statistics

**POLICE CALLS**

**Palo Alto**
- Sept. 10—Sept. 16
- **Violence related**
  - El Camino Real, 9/5, 4:07 a.m.; domestic violence/battery.
  - Sheridan Avenue, 9/1, 6:35 p.m.; child abuse/physical.
- **El Camino Real**
  - 9/7, 9:30 a.m.; sex crimes/indecent exposure.
  - Palo Alto Avenue, 9/7, 10:29 a.m.; battery/assault.
- **San Antonio Road**
  - 9/9, 9:02 a.m.; elder abuse/physical.
- **Edgewood Drive**
  - 9/9, 6:35 p.m.; domestic violence/battery.
  - University Avenue, 9/9, 9:55 p.m.; battery/assault.
  - Park Boulevard, 9/12, 8:05 p.m.; simple battery.
- **El Camino Real**
  - 9/13, 8:31 p.m.; strong arm robbery.
- **Barron Avenue**
  - 9/13, 8:05 p.m.; simple battery.
- **Violence related**
  - Sept. 10—Sept. 16
  - **Palo Alto**
  - 9/7, 9:30 a.m.; sex crimes/indecent exposure.

**LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

**San Antonio Road**
- 9/9, 9:02 a.m.; elder abuse/physical.

**Election Events for Nov. 3, 2020 General Election**

**CANDIDATE FORUMS**

- **CA SENATE DISTRICT 13 (BECKER V. GLEW)**
  - Thursday, September 24 — 7-8 p.m
- **CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT 18 (ESHOO V. KUMAR)**
  - Saturday, September 26 — 4-5 p.m.
- **CA ASSEMBLY DISTRICT 24 (BERMAN V. OHTAKI)**
  - Tuesday, September 29 — 7:30-8:30 p.m.

Register to attend any of the above forums, all on Zoom:

LWPaloAlto.org/candidate-forums.html

**Pros and Cons**

Join a Zoom webinar presentation and discussion of the pros and cons of state and local measures appearing on the Palo Alto, November 3, 2020 ballot.

- **Wednesday, Oct. 7 — 7 p.m.**
- **Wednesday, Oct. 14 — 11:30 a.m.**
- **Sunday, Oct. 11 — 2 p.m.**
- **Sunday, Oct. 17 — 2 p.m.**

Register to attend any of the above forums:

LWPaloAlto.org/pros-cons.html

**QUESTIONS:**

LWPaloAlto.org, lwpaooffice@gmail.com or 650-903-0600.

**OBITUARIES**

A list of local residents who died recently:

- **Judy Elizabeth Dong**, 54, a longtime Palo Alto resident and public library staff member for 25 years, died on Sept. 6.

To read full obituaries, leave memorials and post photos, go to Lasting Memories at PaloAltoOnline.com/obituaries.

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**CANDIDATE FORUMS**

**CA SENATE DISTRICT 13 (BECKER V. GLEW)**

Thursday, September 24 — 7-8 p.m

**CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT 18 (ESHOO V. KUMAR)**

Saturday, September 26 — 4-5 p.m.

**CA ASSEMBLY DISTRICT 24 (BERMAN V. OHTAKI)**

Tuesday, September 29 — 7:30-8:30 p.m.

Register to attend any of the above forums, all on Zoom:

LWPaloAlto.org/candidate-forums.html

After registering, you will be able to submit questions.

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Palo Alto Utilities’ dilemma — it’s really ours, too

by Debbie Mytels

I am writing in response to your article about The Planning and Transportation Commission’s endorsement of Castilleja’s Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR). Bravo to Commissioners Templeton, Hechtman, Lauer and Alcheck for their leadership in service and commitment to their roles in the service of our city of Palo Alto. I am grateful to them for their clarity and commitment to their civic duty. They are true leaders.

In endorsing the FEIR as thorough and complete, they did exactly what they were charged with doing by the citizens of Palo Alto. They were also correct that Castilleja is an asset to the city that has benefited countless young women from Palo Alto for generations. In addition, allowing the school to continue will — by definition — increase opportunity for students from Palo Alto if the all-girls setting is something that feels right for them.

Several of the members of the commission noted that hard work still lies ahead as the conditions of approval are reviewed. This is true, and it is long past time to take on that work. Castilleja does appear very serious about agreement and compliance of this new conditional use permit, which will be a success for the school and for the city.

For those who question the value of Castilleja within our city, have they ever spoken to a graduate to hear the compassion and courage she takes with her into the world we all share? Even if she isn’t their direct neighbor, she is a person whose voice and impact will change the world for the better. If the school can meet the mitigations, allowing more young women to learn and grow in this setting is a benefit to all cities, ours included.

Heidi Hopper
Matadero Avenue, Palo Alto

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The Palo Alto Weekly encourages comments on our coverage or on issues of local interest.

Should the city let retail space be turned into offices?

Submit letters to the editor of up to 300 words to letters@pawweekly.com. Submit guest opinion of 1,000 words to ednews@pawweekly.com. Include your name, address and daytime phone number so we can reach you.

Palo Alto Weekly welcomes letters online, including in our online archives and as a post on Town Square. For more information, contact Editor Assistant Lily Lo at lilylo@pawweekly.com or 650-223-6526 or Editor Jocelyn Dong at jocelyn@pawweekly.com.

Debbie Mytels is a Midtown resident who retired last year from a long career at Acterra, but she’s still volunteering with environmental groups to protect Earth’s climate. She can be reached at dmytels@batnet.com.
Modern Colonial Masterpiece on Over One Acre
Supreme luxury awaits at this prestigious home built in 2013, offering remarkable privacy, unparalleled build quality, and every conceivable modern amenity. With 7 bedrooms, 8.5 bathrooms, and over 9,100 square feet of living space, including a beautiful guest home, this Colonial-style masterpiece rests on a pristine lot of over an acre populated by colorful plantings and specimen trees. Soaring ceilings and excellent use of glass create a bright and inviting ambiance, highlighting high-end appointments including Herringbone flooring and elaborate moldings. Spacious, sophisticated living areas are ideal for both entertaining and everyday living, including the fireplace-centered living room, and the chef’s kitchen that opens fully to the comfortable family room. Arranged over three levels with elevator convenience, this home also includes a library, a lower-level entertainment area with a wet bar and wine room, and five bedroom suites, including the incredible master suite with a romantic fireplace. Resort-like grounds include sweeping lawns, a sparkling pool, a sports court, and a built-in barbecue patio. Adding the finishing touch is a location just moments to both downtown Menlo Park and Palo Alto, with access to acclaimed Menlo Park public schools, and within walking distance of Sacred Heart and Menlo School (buyer to verify eligibility).

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Arts & Entertainment

Palo Alto welcomes Bay Bridge light artist for new gallery show

BY SHERYL NONNENBERG

If you have driven across the Bay Bridge, you have seen Leo Villareal’s large-scale, site-specific “The Bay Lights.” Installed in 2013, it consists of 25,000 LED lights installed on the span that continuously change, thanks to a custom software design.

Further down on the Peninsula, Villareal was chosen as part of the public art program at the new Stanford Hospital. His “Buckyball,” from 2019, is sited at the entrance of the complex and offers a non-repeating sequence of colors and patterns in a sculpture of nested spheres.

But Villareal also works in smaller, gallery-scale editions, as can be seen in “Harmony of the Spheres,” his new exhibition at Pace Gallery in Palo Alto that is now on view until Oct. 10. (The show, which was originally scheduled to be displayed in early spring, was put on hold due to the pandemic.)

There is some irony that Villareal’s small-screen work is on view at a time when our lives are so focused around computer screens, but don’t let that dissuade you from visiting the gallery. This is an art form that must be seen and experienced in person and, after months of online-only art, offers a welcome change. Villareal’s merging of art and technology is always impressive, mesmerizing — and an antidote to the preponderance of politics, anger, negativity and despair that seems to pervade cyberspace at the moment.

“The exhibition consists of 11 screens of various sizes. As always, the Pace installation team has found a way to present his work in the gallery,” said Pace President Elizabeth Sullivan.

Villareal, who holds an undergraduate degree in sculpture from Yale University and a graduate degree from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, found his way to working with light in a serendipitous way. While attending the Burning Man Festival in 1997, he became lost in the desert. Realizing that a large light affixed to his tent would help him find his way, he created a glowing sculptural form. He began working solely with light but added a crucial component — software code. In an email interview, he explained, “The epiphany I had was connecting software and light. To add software and code to that and to start to sequence the light was very profound, but it took me many years to get there.”

Eight of the pieces are part of the artist’s “Instance” series and are, according to gallery information, “Singular works, in their digital and physical forms, that become malleable synchronies wherein the possibility of order, however fleeting and subtle, appears visually across the units before gradually dissipating into a chaotic state.” This translates to a nonstop sequence of patterns and shapes that move, evolve and dance in unpredictable but fascinating ways. Impose upon them what references you like: exploding planets, shooting stars, sunbursts, fireworks or glitter shot from a cannon. The longer you watch, the more things change and yet it is not frenetic or nerve-wracking. As Villareal described it, “My work is very much for humans. It goes beyond the simple combination of software and LEDs. Through my process, I have found a way to tap into something deeper that elicits a sense of wonder and awe in an audience. It feels primal and elemental.”

The artist has also said that his light work is like a “communal campfire.” You will wish that you could set up a chair and spend a lot of time in front of “Musica Universalis.” It dominates the gallery with its size and the boldness of its transformations. The press release describes this piece as “referring to ancient philosophical concept that regards proportions and mathematical exploration of orbital resonance.” Does one need to know that in order to be impressed and captivated by this piece? Definitely not. Relax and enjoy the show.

Pace is open to the public by reservation only, with a limited number per hour. To make a reservation, go to pacegallery.com.

Freelance writer Sheryl Nonnenberg can be reached at nonnenberg@aol.com.
Most real estate training tends to cover the basics of a transaction. I am passionate about ensuring our No Fear program teaches the value of giving back to the community and educating clients about what is best for them in an ever-changing market.

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Palo Alto School Board
CANDIDATES DEBATE

Wednesday, September 30 from 7 – 9 p.m. via Zoom

Featuring the six candidates running for three seats on the Palo Alto Unified School District Board of Trustees:

Katie Causey  Todd Collins  Jennifer DiBrienza  Jesse Ladomirak  Matt Nagle  Karna Nisewaner

PANEL: Jocelyn Dong, Editor, Palo Alto Weekly
Elena Kadvany, Reporter, Palo Alto Weekly
Editors of Paly & Gunn publications

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TO REGISTER: PaloAltoOnline.com/pausd
We invite you to submit questions in advance to: editor@paweekly.com
Three years ago, Mina Makram had surgery on both of his hands. Carpal tunnel, the doctor told him, the result of baking too much.

It didn’t slow Makram down. He spends more time in his Palo Alto bakery than at his home, mixing his secret gluten-free flour blend late at night and experimenting with baked goods that most people assume could never truly taste any good without gluten: bagels, croissants, focaccia, donuts, pita bread. He’s visibly energized by the challenge of accomplishing something that he’s told is impossible.

That’s the driving force behind Misfits Bakehouse on Middlefield Road in Midtown, whose gluten-free baguettes, bagels, cinnamon rolls and cookies have a seriously devoted following — so much so that people donated more than $13,000 for Makram when his first bakery, Ducks and Dragons, fell apart and he had to rebuild.

And they’ve been pre-ordering him his own flour blend late at night and experimenting with baked goods that most people assume could never truly taste any good without gluten: bagels, croissants, focaccia, donuts, pita bread. He’s visibly energized by the challenge of accomplishing something that he’s told is impossible.

The name of the bakery was sounded like a tall order.”

I worked for GE at the time. I kind of hit the corporate glass ceiling because I didn’t have a master’s degree or a PhD. Even though I was doing that work anyways, they would not promote me. I got a job with a startup in Mountain View, also in the healthcare field, things didn’t work out. I got fired. All of a sudden, going from a pretty decent income to zero in the middle of the oven, eat something within 30 minutes (when) it’s still warm, you can’t really taste it. But as soon as it cools down, ... you get that nasty aftertaste. I kept on playing around until I just found the ratio of ingredients. I’m not sure why but I was fascinated with baguettes. That was the first thing I tried to do.

Money was getting very tight ... pretty much almost to zero. I was like, OK, I’ll see how I can get into the farmers market. I checked out the College of San Mateo farmers market. They had a couple of bakers but they didn’t have any gluten-free (ones). At the time, every

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How Mina Makram and his Misfits Bakehouse became the source of the Bay Area’s best gluten-free pastries

Story by Elena Kadvany | Photos by Magali Gauthier

Top, Mina Makram, owner of Misfits Bakehouse, puts an egg wash on some rolls before topping them with cheddar cheese in the Midtown Palo Alto bakery’s kitchen. Above, Sesame, poppy seed and ‘everything’ are among the bagels that the bakery makes.
penny I had, I went out and got all the permits. I had a nice road ride; I sold them. I had a nice SLR camera; I sold that, too. Everything went into getting the first round of ingredients, the permits for the market, and for the commercial kitchen. I forget the saying ... ‘The only way is forward.’ I got the approval for the market and I got all the permits. I was like, ‘Either it works or it’s a bust.’ The first two markets did pretty well. I was able to pay rent. I started building on that.

My first delivery to a grocery store was at Berkeley Bowl. I got there and I give the guy the invoice. I go to the guy purchasing, asking, ‘How do I get paid?’ He’s like, ‘What are you talking about? It’s not 30.’ Net 30 means if I give you a product and you don’t pay for it for 30 days. I literally went back to the car and cried. I didn’t have anything. Everything that we were making covered a little bit of rent and everything (else went) back into the bakery.

I feel like as a new food business, getting into a store like Berkeley Bowl would feel like you’ve kind of made it.

Right away the thing is, gluten free has a stigma. It was already a struggle to get into the stores. It’s automatic: It’s gluten free, you think it’s gonna taste like broccoli soup or a主导花. So when you go to these buyers and you tell them, ‘I have gluten-free bread,’ they’re like, ‘No, we don’t want it.’ We don’t want to try it. For Berkeley Bowl, I tried to get a meeting with him (the buyer) so many times and nothing. I heard he came in at 6 a.m. I got to the parking lot at 5:30 a.m., slept in my car, and I waited until I saw him in the parking lot and I pestered him. I’m like, ‘Please try it.’ Any place that we got to, it was because I pestered the hell out of them. It was rough getting into all these stores and even harder to get into restaurants. It got me jaded at that point. When you hear restaurants (say) ‘We source everything locally; we care about high end ingredients’ — but not when it comes to gluten free.

So at some point did the farmers market take off? I feel like I knew about you from your market following versus seeing your products at grocery stores.

One hundred percent, the farmers markets are what carried me. The way I looked at (the grocery stores) was to get my name out there. But really what got my name out there, even though I got laughed at a lot by anybody that I spoke with in the food industry, was social media. A lot of people say, ‘we’re all about building a community’ but they don’t really know their community. I didn’t say it but that was my aim. I wanted a strong community around the bakery. I think part of it is I grew up in the tech world. I brought that mentality into the bakery, where I always recognized that any brand in the tech world that blew up, even if it had humps in the road and came back even stronger, had this passion from their customers. Customers were not really customers. They were fans. Social media was everything. I couldn’t pay for anything. While I’m waiting for bread to come out of the oven, I’m going through Instagram and looking at everybody who posts about anything that’s gluten free, paleo. What hashtags are they using? When I posted(something), I would use the hashtags and try to get my stuff out there. I think for the first almost year, it was almost like I’m talking to myself. Finally, it started picking up. I know a lot of people get obsessed with us, we have a few thousand followers, and I’m like, that doesn’t matter if you’re not really connecting with them, right? I focused on keeping people involved and engaged. Anybody who would comment on anything, I would respond. Every time I did re- mark, that’s how I started. That’s why when things fell apart with Ducks and Dragons and I decided to go with a GoFundMe campaign, the responses were ridiculous — just the amount of overwhelming love and support ... It paid off, that sense of community. And then when COVID hit ... I just literally went on (social media and posted), ‘We’re here, pick-ups only; we do deliveries; we’re increasing Good Eggs; we’re doing shipping.’ I even reduced the price of shipping. I didn’t say, ‘help help help.’ I was like, ‘We’re here for you.’ Business shot up — the first three, four weeks, by almost 100%. Ninety-five percent of our shipping was outside of the Bay Area. We started getting more customers from states that I’ve never interacted with before, in the Midwest and the west, East Coast, all over Southern California, Oregon, Washington. It plateau’d down, but we’re still doing better than pre-COVID. On average it’s about 150% better than pre-COVID. In a way I feel guilty because I know how hard it is. But I’m grateful. If you look at our social media, it’s very different than any other business. It’s a discussion. I don’t only post about the pretty food. I had someone say, ‘You should get all your food professionally photographed.’ I was like, ‘No.’ I’m not saying my photography is great by any means, but ... it’s what I want. We’re a real brand. We’re not some big corporate brand. I want to have that homemade feeling no matter how big we get. I don’t want pretty pictures. We’re not trying to be fancy. There is nothing fancy about me. I mean, it’s in the name. I was pretty open about (the fact that) I was over 500 pounds and went down to 199 and then I gained 130 pounds back and very publicly lost 100 pounds. That was fully documented on our social media. People can relate to that versus Mister Six-pack or Miss Model. We’re all in this together, whatever reason you’re eating this way.

Was food or baked goods in particular a big thing for you growing up? What role has food played in your life?

Definitely. One of my favorite memories is super early in the morning back in Egypt — in Egypt we don’t call it a bakery. We call them ovens. We would walk together, whatever reason you’re late to that versus Mister Six-pack or Miss Model. The thing that I’m (most) proud of is my flour because that’s the only option versus they loved it because it actually tasted good. Even though I had customers that would order 60, 70 of them at a time, I was not happy with it. I pulled it off. At the time, all I did was I took the bread dough and pressed it and cooked it on the stovetop and that looked like a tortilla but it just didn’t feel right. I came across a YouTube video of how to make traditional tortillas. I was like, ‘Let’s see if my flour can handle that.’ I tried it and it worked. It would poof up and get blistery like regular tortillas. You could dress it with

Cheddar rolls are arranged on a tray before going into the oven at Misfits Bakehouse.

Bakers Gerardo Garcia, left, and Fabiola Hernandez prepare rolls at Misfits Bakehouse.

Eating Out

Misfits

(continued from page 25)
all kinds of sauces and it would not fall apart.

I thought at some point you were trying to make a gluten-free croissant. Did I make that up?

I have two unicorns that I’m chasing: panettone and croissant. I think I’m closer to the croissant than the panettone. It’s funny how things work. If I did not make the tortillas the way I’m making them right now I would not have been able to make the filo dough. Now that I know I can make the filo dough, it’s actually not that far of a stretch away from a croissant. The only hang-up with the filo dough right now ... I cannot find a way to be able to produce as much (as I want). The only way is to get a dough sheeter. If I get a dough sheeter, croissants are the next stop.

Why did you and your family leave Egypt?

We’re refugees. I was 16. The plan at the time was: escape from Egypt, go to Canada, We left Egypt and got to Canada in November. It was minus 55 celsius with windchill. We were in a subway station and jokingly — we had never ever played the lottery before. (We said), we’ll buy one ticket and if it hits, we’ll stay. If it doesn’t, we’ll move to the U.S. So we’re here.

I went to DeVry University. I could barely speak any English, had a very heavy accent. At the time the plan was to finish DeVry and try to get into grad school. My dad had a construction company ... I was 14. I saw things differently when I started. I got kicked out of LA for a couple months to get all the paperwork done, all the interviews — and again, wait. Hurry up and wait. You just never know until you get that letter in the mail saying you got accepted. (It was) stressful. You try not to think about it. I was in school so I made sure to keep myself busy.

In July, you posted on the Misfits Bakehouse Instagram about when you became a U.S. citizen. Can you tell me about that day and how it felt?

It’s hard to put into words. There was a lot of nervousness going into that. They tell you, the green card, you have to surrender it. That made me very nervous. I looked around ... and everybody is like ‘Nah, man, we’re not giving up our green card.’ It’s how we show that we’re OK to be here. It was emotional, but it was exciting. The first thing I did after being sworn in — I walked out and I got a registration to vote. Coming from a country where it doesn’t matter how many times you vote, it doesn’t count, literally, to somewhere where it actually matters — it’s pretty cool. You feel like you can actually make a difference, which is huge. Your voice can be heard.

Why do you identify with the concept of a misfit?

I literally never felt like I fit in anywhere. I liked different music growing up. At GE, I was the youngest by a long shot. I was 20 when I started. I got kicked out of a hospital because they thought I was 14. I saw things differently than most people, even developing recipes. It also happened a lot with my engineering career. (People would say,) ‘This can’t be done.’ I would be able to do it. I always felt like I never fit in with the typical definition of whoever I’m usually working with. The famous Steve Jobs quote — that resonated a lot with me. People who are crazy enough to want to change the world that are the ones that do. I’m not from the food world. I was actually pretty much rejected by everybody in the food world. I was called stupid. I got kicked out of restaurants. I wanted to make these types of breads tasty and that sounded like a tall order.

What has been most challenging for you as a small food business owner during the pandemic?

Being able to meet expectations. Part of being heavy on the community side of things is the expectations are, I don’t want to say higher, but they’re different. The challenge is to keep people engaged and happy and meet their expectations. We’ve had a few missteps where we promised a delivery and didn’t make it because we got overwhelmed and weren’t ready for it. I’m very open with my customers. I’d go on our social media (accounts) and say, ‘I screwed up. We’ll make it up to you.’

What’s your long-term vision for Misfits Bakehouse?

Literally, I want to be across the country. I never had the idea of being in the Bay Area only, especially since the market segment we’re in is completely underserved. There’s nobody doing it at the scale that I want to do it at at the quality we’re doing it at. I don’t want to franchise, but I want to have locations across the country and to be able to deliver fresh bread and that experience wherever we are, wherever we go.

Tell me about the ooey gooey chocolate chip cookies.

I came across a Youtube video — I’m self taught, grad school of YouTube. This guy was recreating Levain Bakery cookies (from the New York City bakery). They looked amazing. I wanted to see if I could make them with my flour. I adjusted it to work with my flour and it worked. You warm them up and break them and it just melts. You get that same experience. A lot of the recipes I come up with ... something catches my eye and I’m like, ‘How do I make this?’ I like to challenge myself. I look at how it is with regular flour and see if I can translate that to my flour. What’s in your flour mix? Almond flour, coconut flour, psyllium husk, flax seed, tapioca, arrowroot and coconut sugar. I’m the only one that knows the recipe. It’s like the Coca Cola recipe.
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This week’s SUDOKU

Answers on page 27.

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