



Community

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LITCHFIELD PARK/GOODYEAR

INDEPENDENT

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October 2025 Volume 6 Issue 10

Your Nonpartisan Community Newspaper • YourValley.net



PebbleCreek organizer turns mahjong passion into community event

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

For Sue Branton, the click of mahjong tiles is the sound of community, mental acuity, and friendship.

Now, the PebbleCreek resident is channeling her 22 years of experience playing and teaching the game into a major event, hosting the upcoming

Robson Communities Mahjong Tournament on Thursday, Nov. 20.

The tournament, which will gather players from the various Robson active adult communities, is the culmination of Branton's deep love for the American version of the Chinese game of skill.

"It's intellectually stimulating,"

said Branton a 75-year-old PebbleCreek resident. "Doctors actually recommend this for anybody, especially for seniors, because of the mental acuity that it takes. The socialization, the confidence, the loneliness, there's a lot of reasons that a physician, and

See Mahjong on page 8

Community leaders push for greater Alzheimer's awareness

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

For families and caregivers facing Alzheimer's disease, a new medical advancement is bringing a sense of optimism. At a recent community session, experts described a new FDA-approved blood test as a game changer in the quest for earlier, more accurate diagnoses.

The session, part of an ongoing series focused on aging and memory care, was a collaborative effort between the Georgia T. Lord Library and Maricopa County's Department of Public Health. Held monthly, the events aim to provide local families with the information and resources needed to navigate the complexities of dementia and memory-related diseases.

The presentation was led by Kenzie McManus, programs director for the Alzheimer's Associ-

See Memory on page 28

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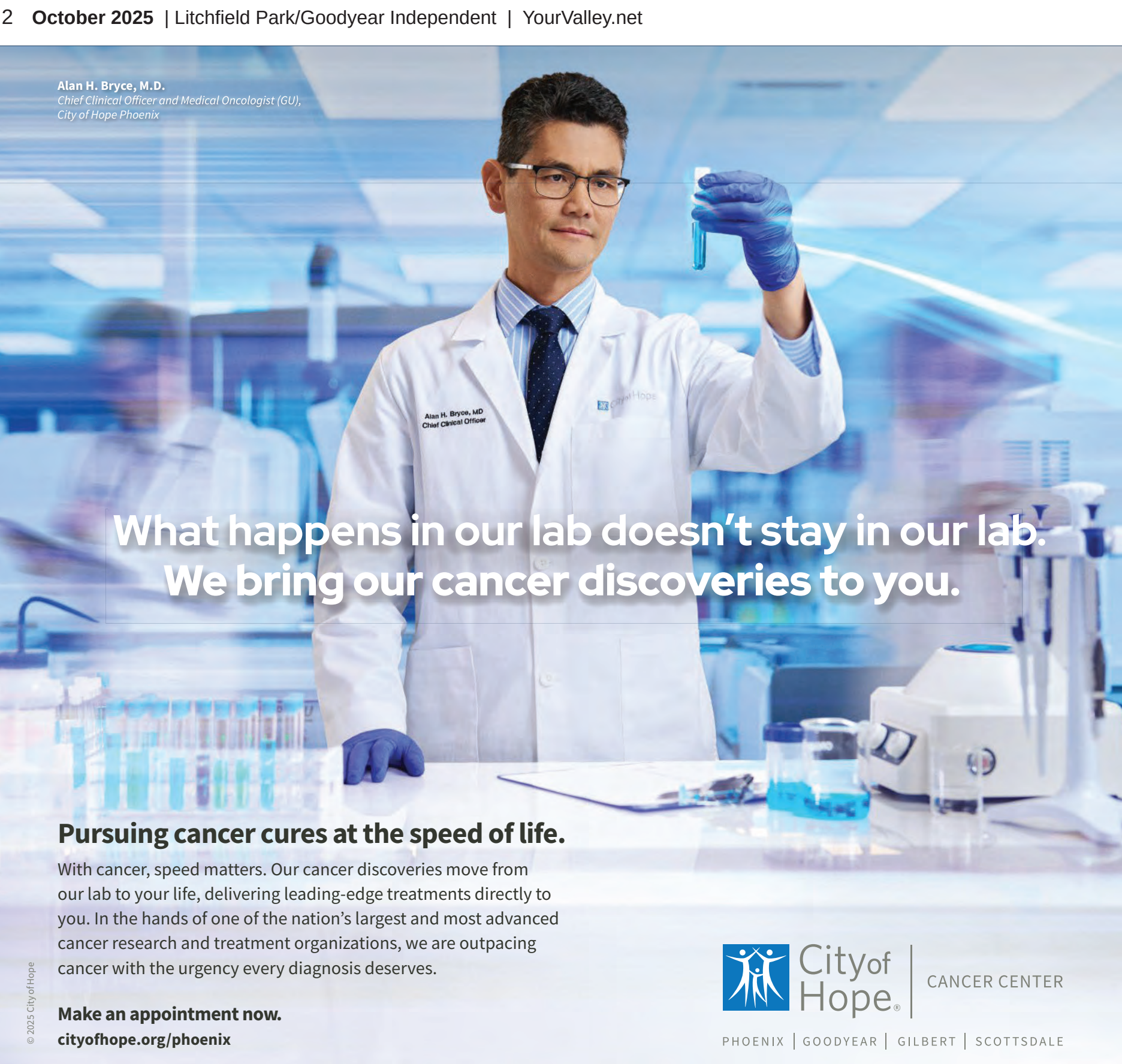


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The City of Goodyear is recognized nationally for its trash truck fire detection program. (Submitted photo/Jordan Byrd)

Goodyear recognized for fire detection program

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The city of Goodyear's Public Works Department has received a national award for its pilot program using thermal imaging cameras to detect fires in garbage trucks.

"Innovation is one of Goodyear's core values," said Public Works Director Sumeet Mohan. "I am very proud of our Solid Waste and Fleet Maintenance divisions that collaborated on creating and developing this innovative system."

The Solid Waste Association of North America named Goodyear the winner of its 2025 Best Safety Innovation Award, recognizing the city's efforts to address a rise in trash truck fires caused by improperly discarded lithium-ion and rechargeable batteries.

Fires in refuse trucks can ignite quickly and spread rapidly, posing risks to drivers, first responders and nearby communities. In response, Goodyear partnered with thermal imaging company Seek

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Liberty Utilities proposes rate hike

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Liberty Utilities Litchfield Park, servicing Litchfield Park, Goodyear, Glendale and Avondale, is proposing significant rate increases for water and wastewater services, citing infrastructure improvements and regulatory compliance costs as key drivers behind the request. The proposed changes, filed with the Arizona Corporation Commission, could take effect as early as the third quarter of 2026.

Under the proposal, average residential water bills would rise by approximately 43.18%, or \$10.43 per month, increasing the average month-

ly bill to \$34.60.

Wastewater bills would see an even steeper increase of 54.14%, or \$24.49 per month, bringing the average bill to \$69.72.

Liberty Litchfield Park has requested a total water revenue increase and a wastewater revenue increase, with both requests aimed at achieving an 8.45% rate of return on the company's proposed fair value rate base.

In addition to the rate increases, Liberty is requesting approval for a rate case expense surcharge of \$0.44 per water customer and \$0.53 per wastewater customer monthly for three years, as well as authorization to

• See **Rates** on page 7



Liberty Utilities propose a rate hike and host community meetings through October. (Mary Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

West Valley to decide on \$415M West-MEC bond

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

On Tuesday, Nov. 4, voters across a broad swath of the West Valley will decide on two propositions, 403 and 406: Proposition 403, a \$415 million bond and Proposition 406, a property measure to authorize the sale, lease or exchange of certain district-owned properties.

The measures, put forth by the Western Maricopa Education Center, seek to secure funding for new campuses, facility upgrades, and program expansions to meet growing workforce demands

The Jurisdictional Election will affect voters in communities including Goodyear, Litchfield Park, Buckeye, Tolleson, Peoria, Glendale, Phoenix, Surprise, Anthem, Whitman and Wickenburg.

West-MEC currently serves over



Voting for West-MEC's bonds begins Tuesday, Nov. 4. (Submitted photo/ West-MEC)

48,000 students from 49 high schools, providing training for careers. The district states the propositions are designed to expand this reach, allowing the district to offer more programs and serve a larger student population.

"Career and Technical Education is one of the best values in education. It is essential that students have the opportunity to take programs during their high school years that will train them for

• See **Bond** on page 6



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Bond

- From page 4

a career before graduating,” said Dr. Scott Spurgeon, West-MEC superintendent.

In Arizona, school bonds provide funding to educational institutions bonds are a form of debt that allows districts to raise money for significant projects and enhancements.

When a school district needs funds for construction, renovation or significant repairs, it can propose a bond issue to the school district’s voters. This proposal outlines the intended use of the funds, which might include building new classrooms, upgrading technology, or improving safety features. If voters approve the bond measure, the district distributes bonds to investors who borrow money that will be repaid over time with added interest.

The approval process for school bonds begins with a proposal by the district’s governing board. This proposal is then presented to the community, often accompanied by informational meetings and materials that detail the necessity and benefits of the bond.

The final decision is made through a public vote, held during an election.

Once approved, the district sells the bonds to investors, who are essentially lending money to the district. In return, the district agrees to make regular interest payments and repay the principal amount over a long period of time. These payments are funded through property taxes levied on local residents. Proposition 403 would authorize West-MEC to issue \$415 million in bonds to fund the construction of new campuses, expansions, and upgrades to training facilities and technology.

The bond is not expected to result in a tax rate increase.

If approved, the tax rate is projected to remain at \$0.13 per \$100 of assessed property value, due to rising property values and the retirement of

existing debt.

Proposition 406 would allow the district to sell or lease certain district-owned properties. The proceeds would be reinvested into educational improvements, such as acquiring new school sites, building or upgrading facilities, and purchasing technology and equipment.

West-MEC has several planned capital projects in new school development or expansion of existing campuses across the region, some of which the district states are dependent on bond funding.

The district works closely with community leaders, many of whom endorsed the coming bonds.

Litchfield Park Mayor Thomas Schoaf called West-MEC a vital part of the region’s quality of life and workforce development.

“Now more than ever, we must ensure our students have the education needed to compete in the local, national, and global economy,” Schoaf said. “This means supporting diverse career paths for college-bound students and those pursuing career and technical training... With programs in construction, health sciences, technology, electrical, plumbing, and much more, they are creating the pipeline of qualified workers needed to meet the demands of our growing job market.”

Goodyear Mayor Joe Pizzillo also expressed support for the measures.

“These are wise and forward-looking investments in our region’s economic and educational future that come without raising taxes,” Pizzillo said. Let’s invest in our future by ensuring every student has access to the programs and training they need to succeed—right here in our community,” he said.

Check Independent Newsmedia at yourvalley.net for background on debates and continuing elections coverage.

More information is available at elections.maricopa.gov.

Briefs

• From page 4

Thermal to develop a system that monitors temperatures inside the truck's hopper, the area where garbage is compacted. If temperatures reach 200 degrees Fahrenheit, an in-cab alarm alerts the driver to take precautionary action.

City officials said the early warning system gives drivers time to safely unload potentially hazardous materials away from residential areas, reducing the risk of injury and limiting damage to vehicles.

Goodyear is the first city in the U.S. to test this specific use of thermal imaging technology on solid waste trucks. The pilot program involved collaboration among the city's solid waste, fire, and fleet maintenance departments.

Visit goodyearaz.gov/hhw for information.



Richmond American Homes announces the opening of Portfolio at Lucero in Goodyear. (Submitted photo/Peter Madrid)

New neighborhood announced in Estrella

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Richmond American Homes recently opened its newest neighborhood, Portfolio at Lucero for viewing. The community is located within the master-planned development of Estrella, it includes 92 homesites and offers five floor plans.

Located in the West Valley, Estrella is a master-planned community. Resident amenities include community centers, pools, fitness centers, parks, trails, lakes, open space, and a golf course.

Visit estrella.com.

Rates

• From page 4

issue up to \$65 million in long-term debt financing. The financing would support a shift in the company's capital structure from 74% equity to 54% equity and 46% debt.

The utility is also proposing new mechanisms to adjust rates annually, including a Cost of Service Reconciliation Mechanism and, alternatively, a Federal Compliance Cost Recovery Mechanism targeting costs associated with meeting federal regulations for PFAS and other "forever chemicals."

To inform the public and receive feedback, Liberty will host three community meetings in October. Each event will feature a presentation at 5:30 p.m., followed by a Q&A session with Liberty staff:

Tuesday, Oct. 21, at Hampton Inn & Suites Goodyear, 2000 N Litchfield Rd. in Goodyear, 4:30–6:30

p.m.

Thursday, Oct. 23, at Dreaming Summit Elementary, 13335 W Missouri Ave. in Litchfield Park, 4:30–6:30 p.m.

A formal public hearing before the Arizona Corporation Commission is scheduled to begin March 23, 2026, at 10 a.m. at the Commission's offices in Phoenix. Public comments will also be accepted by phone on March 4 and March 11, 2026. Full details, including phone numbers and passcodes, are available on the ACC's website.

Residents interested in participating more formally in the case can request to intervene by filing a motion with the Arizona Corporation Commission no later than Friday, Oct. 17.

More information about the proposed changes, including the full rate case application and instructions for public comment or intervention, is available at azcc.gov and libertyutilities.com.

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Mahjong

• From page 1

I, would recommend seniors to play.”

Branton’s journey with mahjong began modestly. When first introduced to the game, she admits she found the engraved tiles and intricate rules overwhelming.

“I struggled with the teaching style, I looked at the tiles and I ran,” she recalled. “It took me two years to come back to mahjong.”

But once she returned, the game quickly became a passion. She was so dedicated she began teaching, often instructing 20 to 22 people at a time in six-week courses. For Branton, teaching was a way to share the mental and social benefits of the game.

“That’s the bug, I’m telling you, that draws you back to the game every week, every time,” she said.

The strategic depth of the game, which, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, involves obtaining sets of tiles similar to rummy while preventing opponents from completing their hands, is a major part of its appeal. Studies have shown that playing mahjong can help slow cognitive decline and improve general memory in older adults.

For Branton and the many others she has taught, it’s a non-negotiable part of a healthy, active lifestyle.

“It is intellectually and socially stimulating. I just love it,” Branton said.

For players like 96-year-old Mary Coon, mahjong is a vital part of staying young. Coon, a PebbleCreek resident credits the game and her active lifestyle with keeping her mind sharp.

“There’s a quiet focus. I like it to stay social and it keeps the mind going,” Coon said. “And at this age, you have got to keep going.”

Branton has lived in PebbleCreek for 25 years and sees the upcoming tournament as an extension of the tight-knit community life she said she



Pebble Creek residents play mahjong to connect to the community. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

cherishes.

“I think we have a really good thing here in the West Valley, we have a community that really cared. PebbleCreek, hands down, the best place I’ve ever lived. I wouldn’t, for the world, leave here.” Branton said. “It’s family and you just can’t get enough of the stuff our community offers.”

The Mahjong Maniacs tournament is a chance to expand that sense of community, inviting players from all Robson locations, including Arizona’s Robson Ranch, SaddleBrooke Ranch, The Preserve, Quail Creek and Robson Ranch in Texas.

The event, which runs from 8:15 a.m. to 4 p.m., is limited to 88 people. Branton said the event will feature friendly competition and cash prizes. The \$60 entry fee includes a catered lunch.

In addition to the main competition, there will be a 50/25/25 raffle benefiting a charitable organization.



Sue Branton plays mahjong with her PebbleCreek community. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

The deadline for registration and a refundable cancellation is Monday, Nov. 10. For Branton, the event is a testament to the enduring power of a

simple tile game to bring people together.

Visit pebblecreekpost.com for more information.



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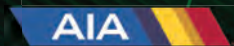
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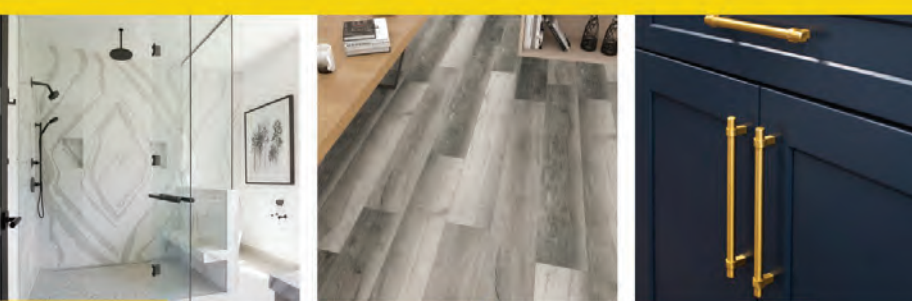
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BUSINESS

Goodyear business develops senior care in West Valley

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

With a new business and a community-wide initiative, Helena Morgan is bringing a renewed focus to geriatric care and providing support for families navigating the complex challenges of aging and dementia. Morgan said she is aiming to bridge the gap between healthcare needs and accessible community resources in the West Valley.

Her professional journey has taken her through a wide range of care settings. With two decades of healthcare experience Morgan has serviced hospitals, inpatient and home hospice, and rehabilitation centers. She says this diverse experience, combined with her background in dementia case management and public education, gives her a unique perspective on the needs of older adults.

Morgan said her work is deeply personal, stemming from her relationship with her own grandparents. Morgan was cared for by them as a child and was later a caregiver to her grandmother, who developed Alzheimer's. This experience is the driving force behind Gracious Navigation, the business she recently launched.

"I treat each client as if they were my own grandparent, each connection is precious. It's an opportunity to, care and love on people and it's what fulfills me," Morgan said.

One of the services she offers is guiding families through the Arizona Long-Term Care Services application process, a state Medicaid program that provides financial support for long-term care that may applicants find daunting. Morgan said she helps families paint the picture of their loved one's needs, using her clinical insight to document the required assistance with activities of daily



Helena Morgan opens a new business while building community for caretakers across the West Valley. (Submitted photo/Helena Morgan)

living.

"I have really, the last six years, dug in to learn about Arizona Long-Term Care, what are they looking for when you can apply for it," she said. "If people are already at a time in their lives where they're overwhelmed, and so asking more questions and having to provide paperwork, it just becomes so hard."

Beyond ALTCS, Morgan says her work is a testament to the belief that every person, regardless of age or health, deserves to be treated with dignity and love.

This commitment extends to her community advocacy work. She is an active member of the Goodyear Dementia Action Team, a local chapter of the national Dementia Friendly America initiative. DFA aims to create communities where people living with dementia and their care partners can live, engage, and thrive without fear of stigma.

As part of the action team, Morgan helps lead new Memory Cafes in the West Valley. These free social gatherings are designed for people living with memory or thinking changes, and their caregivers, with no diagnosis required.

• See **Care** on page 26

Ballpark Village breaks ground in Goodyear

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Scottsdale-based real estate firm Diversified Partners broke ground on Ballpark Village, a 7.7-acre retail development located at the northeast corner of Estrella Parkway and Yuma Road.

The new center will feature a mix of restaurants, retail shops and service providers. Confirmed tenants include Starbucks, Jersey Mike's Subs, Pacific Dental Services, Farmer Boys, Nautical Bowls, Mesquite, a locally owned Mexican concept and The Nail Boss, a Goodyear-based salon. Additional space remains available for lease.

CEO Walt Brown Jr. addressed city officials, business partners and community members during the public ceremony.

"This corner has sat empty for decades," Brown said. "And now we get to bring something vibrant and exciting to the community."



Diversified Partners breaks ground on Ballpark Village in Goodyear. (Mary Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

Brown thanked the city of Goodyear's economic development and planning staff, calling them an essential part of the project's progress.

"Projects like this don't just happen. They take vision, they take trust, and they take teamwork," he said. "We've

been investing millions of dollars. When you're doing that, you want to be working in a city that supports you. Goodyear has been that kind of partner."

The development is being built in phases. Brown said the first group of

leases are set and the development will attract more attention from local businesses.

"In 90 days, we're going to start on the south side," he said. "Once we get some buildings up and utilities are stubbed, the rest will move quickly. We've worked closely with the bank to make sure that the city would allow us to space it out. Some cities won't, but Goodyear did."

Vice Mayor Wally Campbell, who has lived in Goodyear for 26 years, called the groundbreaking a long-awaited milestone.

"This lot has been vacant all that time," Campbell said. "We're just thrilled that they wanted to do a public groundbreaking so that we can get the excitement of our residents and show what's coming."

For more information about Ballpark Village or leasing opportunities, visit dpcrc.com.

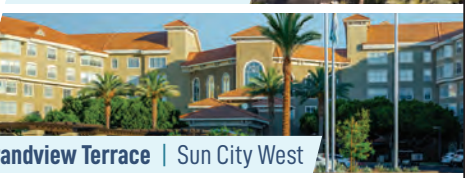


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BUSINESS MOVES



Goodyear's Slick City Action Park opens its doors to community members in October. (Submitted photo/Amy Aust)

1626 N. Litchfield Road, Litchfield Park
Suite 280, Goodyear

3 Villas Goodyear

Now welcoming residents, Villas Goodyear is a residential community offering modern living in a convenient location.
870 S. Sarival Ave., Goodyear

4 Villas Litchfield Park

Villas Litchfield Park is the latest housing development to open in the area, bringing new housing to the heart of Litchfield Park.
12730 W. Camelback Rd.,

5 Litchfield Perk

Litchfield Perk, a "Friends," themed coffee shop, just opened its doors selling coffees teas and specialty drinks.
4870 N. Litchfield Road, Suite 103, Litchfield Park, AZ

6 Slick City

Slick City has launched its newest indoor slide park in Goodyear, delivering a high-energy experience for kids and families alike.
15305 W. McDowell Rd., Goodyear

1 America First Credit Union

America First Credit Union has recently opened a new branch, expanding its banking services to the Goodyear community.
15725 W. McDowell Road, Goodyear

2 Wilde Wealth Management Group

The newly opened Wilde Wealth Management Group office in Goodyear is now offering personalized financial services to local clients.

Arizona Leadership

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THINGS TO DO

Volunteer mountain bikers plan race on Estrella trails

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Estrella Cup mountain bike race is returning after a five year hiatus, offering riders an intense challenge on the rugged slopes of the Estrella Mountains. More than just a competition, the event serves as the primary fundraiser for the Estrella Trails Group, an all-volunteer nonprofit dedicated to building and maintaining the trail system that has become the community's top amenity.

The race, hosted Saturday, Dec. 6 which is capped at 200 participants, is critical to the group's vision of securing its own financial future, ensuring the trails remain free and accessible.

"The long term goal for me is to get the race to a point where we make enough income off the race that the group is self-sufficient, and we don't need to rely on the developer," said Henry Brumbach, Estrella Trails Group president and owner of West Valley Insurance.

The funds raised will go directly into improving the user experience for both bikers and hikers.

"The funds will be used for trail improvements," said Rob Wilson, a librarian at the Georgia T. Lord Library and an active Estrella Trails Group member. "We want to get to the point where we can become a 501(c)(3) and then once we get the 501(c)(3) status, we'll be able to put in for grants so we can add some infrastructure to the trails like shade structures."

The trails: An amenity built by passion

For members like Wilson, mountain biking became an immersive outdoor experience superior to indoor exercise.



Rob Wilson and Estrella Trails Group, led by Henry Brumbach, plan the Estrella Cup Mountain Bike Race. (Submitted photo/Rob Wilson)

"I started as a hiker but wanted to use the trails like they were supposed to be used. I just bought a cheap used bike, I started riding and never went back to the gym," Wilson said.

The group's regular night rides are a vital part of the club's social scene.

"There's just so much more to being outdoors... you get the nature fix, and riding with a group, you also get the social element," Wilson said.

Brumbach, who got temporarily lost the first time he went night riding, said the group dynamic has grown since he joined the club and it makes the intense effort worth it.

"I thought I was going to have a heart attack, because I'm trying to keep up with these guys, I took a wrong turn and could see their lights out in the distance," Brumbach said. "Now it's different, we have a community, a team, there's somebody there to keep you going the right way and to say (don't get lost,)" Brumbach said.

The club gathers to make plans and to ride together. The experience of night riding in the desert adds to the appeal.

"With all the stars out, it's spectacular. You see moonrises and things you might never have seen," Wilson said.

The Estrella Mountains trail system was born out of a passion for the outdoors. A recent survey confirmed the trails' importance to residents.

Willson said that Estrella's 50 miles of hiking and biking trails, maintained by Estrella Trails Group, was the community's top listed amenity.

"Number two wasn't even close," Wilson said.

This high community demand has helped formalize the group's work, which started without permission on land owned by the previous developer. Now working with the current developer, the Estrella Trails Group is able to anticipate the need for trail expansion before the community calls for it.

"We get plans for future communities so that we can put trail infrastructure before buildings go up... people love the Estrella trails," Brumbach said.

Despite the formal partnerships, the work remains volunteer-driven.

"We are doing all the work... Those trails have to be maintained and there's a lot for our small club to do," Wilson said.

Volunteers are the foundation of Estrella Trails Group. The club members maintain the trails that allow the community to ride safely. Volunteers also make events like the Estrella Cup mountain bike race possible. The group is actively seeking volunteers to staff aid stations, registration, parking, post-race clean-up and is holding trail maintenance days every Saturday in October and November to prepare the course.

Race details

The Estrella Cup will be held at 17567 W Elliot Road in Goodyear and features courses that utilize both private land and Estrella Mountain Regional Park trails.

Registration for the 2025 Estrella Cup is now open.

The race lineup includes:

Endurance Course: 47 miles with about 4,000 feet of climbing, starting at 7 a.m.

Short Course: 20 miles, starting at 9 a.m.

Junior Course: 10 miles for riders 12 and under, starting at 10 a.m.

The event is capped at 200 riders.

"We've already gotten over 70 responses so, same day registration very likely will not be an option this year," Brumbach said.

Beginners who plan to tackle the challenging terrain. For adult riders, the shortest course is 20 miles, and will require training.

Among others, the event will be sponsored by the City of Goodyear.

Visit bikereg.com for registration information and course details. Follow the Estrella Trails Group on Facebook for community updates.

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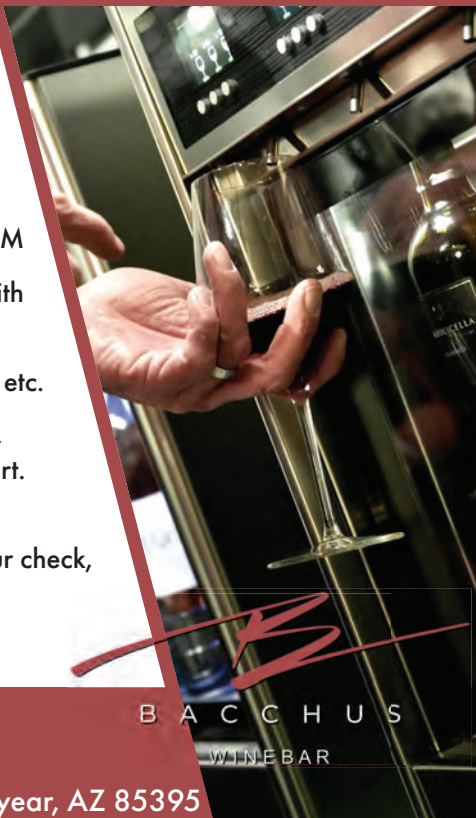
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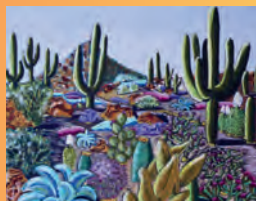
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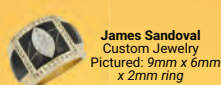
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EMCC hosts 12th annual West Valley Veterans Day Run

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Registration is open for the 12th Annual West Valley Veterans Day Ceremony and 5K/1-mile walk and run.

The event will take place Tuesday, Nov. 11, at Estrella Mountain Community College, 3000 N. Dysart Road in Avondale. The 1-mile run begins at 9:45 a.m., followed by the 5K at 10 a.m. A Veterans Day ceremony and race placement announcements are scheduled for 11 a.m. at Estrella North Plaza.

All proceeds from the event will benefit the Dr. Ernest Lara-EMCC Veterans Scholarship Fund, which assists student veterans facing financial barriers to higher education.

"It's important to us to honor our veterans with more than words," said Dr. Rey Rivera, president of Estrella Mountain Community College. "By hosting this fundraiser 5k event, we're able to help veterans take the next step in their educational or career pathway."

College officials said veteran students face an increased risk of poverty and homelessness, and the Post-911 GI Bill covers only 36 months of education.

"Veterans frequently experience challenges and hardships during the transition from military to civilian life," said U.S. Army Veteran Nathan Kel-



EMCC hosts the 12th annual West Valley Veterans Day Run. (Mary Goldmeer / Independent Newsmedia)

ley, EMCC's Veteran Services Department manager. "It is important to be able to provide support when and where it is needed. The proceeds from this event — thanks to these wonderful runners — give us the flexibility to offer that extra support during potential times of hardship, increasing their chances of success."

The first 400 registrants will receive a finisher's medal. Packet pickup is scheduled for Wednesday, Nov. 5, from 4 to 8 p.m., and Saturday, Nov. 8, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Estrella Mountain Community College. No pets are allowed to participate in the run.

The morning will also include family-friendly activities with Avondale's police and fire departments.

Visit estrellamountain.edu/vetfun-run for more information and registration details.

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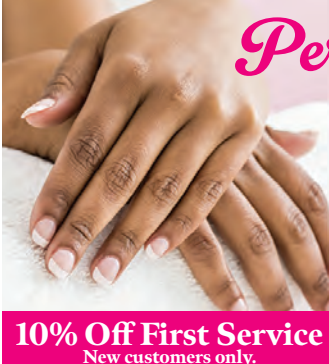
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'Catitude' celebrates aging artists

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Goodyear Arts & Culture Commission, in partnership with Catitude Arts, hosted an artist reception to showcase works created through its Creative Aging program for adults 55 and older.

Creative Aging is a national movement focused on highlighting the positive connection between creative expression and quality of life among older adults. The Goodyear, Catitude exhibit features visual and performing arts, along with a variety of workshops. The displayed pieces represent work produced during the most recent Creative Aging season.

Gayle Glenn, a retired art teacher and longtime instructor in the program, had four pieces in the exhibition. One of her paintings, "Coral Reef in Costa Rica," won first place.



Gayle Glenn wins first place in the Catitude Arts Creative Aging exhibit. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

Glenn said she sees the classes as both instructive and community-building.

"I love taking the classes, even when I'm teaching there's always something to learn," she said. "I like being with the other artists, it's a beautiful community."

Glenn said that balancing her dual roles as educator and student has enriched her own practice.

Dariana Trevizo, director of programs and development for Catitude Arts, helped coordinate the reception and the annual show.

"We are giving love to all these artists who have taken classes in our fiscal year," Trevizo said.

Trevizo said class instructors, city staff and Catitude Arts volunteers maintain a master list of student participants and coordinate the logistics of the reception.

"We are able to bring together our community here and allow them to celebrate the year and we are celebrating the opportunity to allow them to be more creative, I love it so much," Trevizo said.

Catitude Arts was founded in 2010 by local artist Bonnie Lewis with a mis-

sion to make art accessible. Its programs include courses for high school students to build portfolios and for seniors with no prior art experience. In 2017 the organization launched a Mural Mentorship program, emphasizing its values of Community, Arts and Team.

In Arizona, the Creative Aging movement has gained institutional support. AZ Creative Aging, an initiative of the Arizona Commission on the Arts, is backed by the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust. Its goals include training teaching artists, supporting aging service providers and embedding best practices in communities statewide.

The Arizona Commission on the Arts, states that decades of research suggest that older adults participating in professionally conducted arts programs enjoy fewer doctor visits, improved cognitive function and higher morale with reduced social isolation.

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EDUCATION

Litchfield Park arts academy starts audition process

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

A new high school designed to transform student artistry into industry-ready careers is opening enrollment opportunities for the first set of classes.

The Hilltop School for the Arts is set to open in August 2026 on Litchfield Park's historic Hilltop site at Dysart Road and Camelback. The school will welcome approximately 400 students across all four grade levels in its inaugural year, an uncommon approach for new schools, which typically begin with freshmen only.

"This is the time to be able to become part of the Hilltop and become a part of our legacy," said Principal Julie Jones, a longtime arts educator and the visionary behind the school.

Jones, a former leader of Desert Edge High School's Conservatory of Arts and Design, said the school's mission, "artistry to industry," is aimed at students who want to pursue the arts professionally.

"We want to be able for you to take your craft, your skill, your talent to that next level," she said. "We want to help you be that, but our main focus is that you can work in the industry."

Auditions are available to anyone around the Valley.

Jones said her background in the arts inspired the school's founding. She emphasized Hilltop isn't just for students who enjoy art as a hobby, but for those determined to make a career of it.

"As word spreads, we anticipate this becoming a competitive and elite institution, we want to set you up for success," Jones said.

The school was designed from the ground up to support its arts-focused curriculum, including a 700-seat pro-



Julie Jones welcomes potential students to audition for Auga Fria's new arts high school. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

fessional-grade theater, a 100-seat black box playhouse, and a visual arts building with a gallery and framing shop.

"I can just imagine what amazing things we can do with all that community (space)," said Ryan Williams, the school's Visual Arts Program Coordinator.

Each of the school's seven academies offers career-specific training:

Cinematography and Film: Students will have access to a 2,000-square-foot motion picture studio and editing labs. They'll also take acting courses to better understand production from all angles.

Dance Performance: Featuring professional studios and marley floors, this academy focuses on ballet as a foundation. Competitive dance teams are also planned.

Instrumental Performance: Students will explore genres like jazz and rock alongside classical ensembles. Performances will be held in the community, from weddings to public events.

Theater Acting: From acting to vocal performance and dance, students will take courses like "Storytelling Through Song" and professional development courses covering headshots and SAG card preparation.

• See **Audition** on page 22

Liberty Elementary board removes interim superintendent

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Liberty Elementary School District governing board has terminated the contract of Interim Superintendent Trevor McDonald, just months after hiring him to lead the district.

The board voted 4-1 during a special meeting Sept. 24 to terminate McDonald's contract, waiving the required 30-day written notice. McDonald had been placed on leave earlier this month.

During the same meeting, the board also voted unanimously to self-report possible violations of the state's procurement code and open meeting law to the Arizona Attorney General's Office and the state auditor.

Board leadership said both matters were tied to McDonald's initial leave of absence.

"I do not believe he acted with any malintention for the district. I think he makes student-center decisions," said Board Member Kelly Zimmerman, who voted against McDonald's removal. "I think he empowered staff to do what's best for students and I think he clearly understood the role of the board and clearly the role of superintendent and worked to make the district run smoothly."



Trevor McDonald

McDonald, who was appointed in July, is the third person to hold the superintendent position in three years. His hiring followed the board's decision in April to place then-Superintendent Cort Monroe on permanent leave, citing community complaints over legal, financial and accountability issues.

McDonald, who was appointed in July, is the third person to hold the superintendent position in three years. His hiring followed the board's decision in April to place then-Superintendent Cort Monroe on permanent leave, citing community complaints over legal, financial and accountability issues.

In a statement released in early September, McDonald said he was committed to providing consistent leadership and across the district in support of prioritizing students.

"As your superintendent, I remain deeply committed to providing that same consistency at the district level," McDonald stated. "That means making thoughtful decisions, building strong systems and ensuring that every part of our district is aligned in support of one common goal."

Before joining Liberty, McDonald was chief business officer for Vista del Mar School District in Gaviota, California. He previously served as superintendent of Lompoc Unified School District from 2013 to 2022 and was named Superintendent of the Year by the California Continuation Education Association in 2020.

The governing board is now con-

sidering a formal superintendent search. During a recent meeting, representatives from the Arizona School Administrators Association outlined their process, including potential timelines and costs.

"It's not our search, it's your search," said Dr. Paul Tighe, ASA's executive director. "We're just here to help you find a superintendent if you so choose."

Tighe said stakeholder engagement is a key part of the process.

"It's important to have a clean and transparent process that involves and engages stakeholders," he said. "How that is done is very customizable, but these are the kinds of goals we recommend with anyone we engage with."

No timeline has been finalized for the search.

Visit liberty25.org for more information.

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SPORTS

Millennium medley relay ready to defend crown

By Richard Smith

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Millennium boys swimming is well into its second year in Division I after winning the Division II team title in 2023.

The Tigers cannot match the depth of bigger programs like Phoenix Brophy Prep or Phoenix Pinnacle. But they have their new rivals in terms of versatility.

Three of the four swimmers on Millennium's 2024 state title 200-yard medley team are back. This year they have a legitimate shot at two relay golds.

"The team always does well at invitationals because these guys can score, and that's how you win at the relay," Millennium Coach Jessica Cox said. "If we go against Brophy at a dual meet, nobody can really beat them at a dual meet. But if you get them at an invitational and you spread out the talent, they're beatable."

Seniors Cole Faut and Zac Clark are back along with junior Ewan Cain. Last year, Marcos Bravo handled the butterfly and Joel Arnold the breaststroke.

As Faut said, that relay was the Tigers' specialty last year.

"The fact that we had those specialists, everyone around us said that team will be a state champion in the



Millennium's 200-yard medley relay team gets ready to step on to the podium after winning the Division I title in November 2024 at Skyline Aquatic Center in Mesa. The swimmers are, center, front row, Zac Clark and Marcus Bravo, and center, back row, Cole Faut and Ewan Cain. All but the graduated Bravo are back this season. (For Independent Newsmedia/Courtesy Jessica Cox)

medley," Cox said.

It was her first season as a swim coach. Her husband, Anthony, swam at Purdue and handles most of the work on technique and strategy.

During last year's Division I state meet the strategy was simple — roll out those specialists and watch them go. The Tigers cruised, beating both Mesa Mountain View and Brophy's relays by more than two seconds.

"It definitely was a big accomplish-

ment. We'd won a bunch in DII. It was nice to prove ourselves against the best competition," Faut said.

Cain was the new guy last year and said he was happy to make an impact on the team. He's back to handle the backstroke leg.

Joel Arnold graduated and his replacement is still to be decided. Junior Justus Heilshorn is the breaststroke specialist.

But junior Alex Arnold is the fourth

best swimmer in the program. So there is the possibility that Clark could handle the breaststroke and Faut might take the butterfly leg.

"They stay composed. They are used to swimming at such a high level that they're able to hold their emotions," Cox said.

Brophy always looms as a contender. So do two schools disqualified at state last year.

Scottsdale Chaparral has a new coach, and probably will not be disqualified in the medley relay — not to mention the 400-yard freestyle relay. Plus, the other team with an impressive debut in Division I last year was a medley contender

"There was another team in the running last year but they were DQed, Arizona College Prep. They have a really good team," Cain said.

Cain probably will swim the 100 backstroke and 200 individual medley.

He is also looking forward to a chance to make his mark at state Nov. 8, after being sick during last year's Division I final.

"Swimming on a high school team is a lot different than club. It's a lot more fun," Cain said. "You get to meet a lot of kids and travel a lot. There's good competition because there's so

• See **Swimming** on page 22

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Swimming

• From page 20

many kids at Division I.”

Cox is in her 18th year as a teacher at Millennium, and formerly the Tigers head track and field as an assistant coach in volleyball

From the perspective of integrating the swim and diving program more into the rest of the campus and exhibiting more discipline, Cox said last year was a growth year.

She, her husband and the swimmers also had to dig the program out of a scandal that dampened the 2023 title. That team’s coach was arrested in by Buckeye Police July 2024.

“Last year was rougher. They hadn’t had a teacher in five years. It was also after a scandal,” Cox said. “There was a learning curve last year. It’s meaningful and I hope we get on the podium often.”

Practically the whole team swims

club for the Westside Silver Fins. So Cox set up morning practice three days a week, and more of the advanced club swimmers attend those.

Afternoon practices are set every non-meet weekday. Cox said this generation loves choice and having choice on practice times seems to be working.

“It’s a fun experience. We have great coaches but we also have a good team. So you’re pushing yourself in practice,” Faut said.

Most of all, the Tigers boys and girls swim team now has 37 athletes, plus a stronger connection to the rest of campus.

The big four are all great students, Cox said. Faut will be a high school All-American, which is an academic honor, too.

“They way they’re representing themselves on campus is excellent. They have a really good reputation with grades and all that,” Cox said. “How they perform is secondary.”

Audition

• From page 18

Set Design and Theater Production: Includes training in lighting, sound, costume, and makeup, all using industry-standard tools and software.

Vocal Performance: Emphasizes piano, sight-reading, music theory, and ensemble work, with competitive groups like acapella planned.

Visual Arts: A dedicated building will support studio work, curation, and marketing. Two outdoor patios and a student gallery enhance the experience. Hilltop is also focused on building direct connections with the professional arts world. The school’s theater will host touring artists and Broadway-level productions through a partnership with promoter Danny Zelisko.

“Our kids will then get to go in and work with those artists,” Jones said. “If I have (an artist) there for the day, our kids are going to be able to go in during the school day and work with

their lighting, their sound, their director, their tech.”

Williams noted every graduate will be guaranteed the Arizona State Seal of Arts Proficiency, an honor he helped design.

“It’s a huge honor, and we will guarantee 100% achievement on this,” he said. “Every student at the Hilltop will far exceed the minimum expectations of the seal.”

Assistant Principal Noah Bleckner explained the school day will run from 8:50 a.m. to 4:25 p.m.

“A lot of times what happens is students are at school and then stay after for practice or rehearsal,” said Bleckner. “We want that time to be built into the day so that they can leave at 4:25 every day,”

Bleckner said the school’s policies are designed to instill professionalism and accountability. Students will be required to dress professionally and cell phones will not be permitted during instruction.

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Domestic violence shelter celebrates expansion

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

As Arizona continues to grapple with the impact of domestic violence, the New Life Center in Goodyear is answering the call with a major expansion.

The shelter, which already supports over 300 survivors annually, is unveiling six new rooms designed to provide much-needed refuge for survivors, increasing its capacity by 100 people each year. The expansion comes at a time when local law enforcement reports rising demand for safe spaces as domestic violence remains one of the most pressing issues facing the community.

Goodyear Chief of Police Brian Issitt highlighted the urgency of these additions during the shelter's ribbon-cutting ceremony, saying that domestic violence is one of the most heart-wrenching calls officers regularly respond to.

"This is where law enforcement

meets confession, where emergency response meets long term healing. Our good year officers are trained to do their job, to intervene, to protect, to remove people from danger. But we cannot do it alone," Issitt said. "We need partners. We need safe places. We take survivors, places that don't just offer safety for one night, but a path to stability and recovery. New Life Center is one of those partners. This place represents refuge. It represents a lifeline... it represents hope."

According to the Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence, Arizona saw 84 domestic violence-related deaths in 2023. And despite the constant need, New Life Center states that nearly 88% of survivors seeking shelter in Maricopa County are turned away due to a lack of resources and space. The New Life Center's expansion aims to change that by providing

additional, secure space for those fleeing violence.

The newly opened six suites, which the center refers to as "villas," are designed to meet the specific needs of survivors who arrive without children. In addition to the villas, the center has also renovated its campus to include updated spaces that foster healing and dignity for



Kate Thone

those in need.

"(We) designed a space that is not only functional, but also trauma informed," said Kate Thone, CEO of New Life Center. "Every detail was chosen with the wellbeing of survivors that come to us, with them in mind, top of mind."

The center's renovation includes significant upgrades to its existing

structures, including the family housing spaces and clubhouse, which serves as a hub for children and families to connect and build a sense of community. Thone said these renovations were made possible thanks to a collaborative effort among the shelter's donors, volunteers, and construction partners.

Key sponsors include Thunderbirds Charities, the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, the Del E. Webb Foundation, and BHHS Legacy Foundation. In addition to the villas, these foundations helped fund other vital improvements across the shelter, including the landscaping, furnishing, and trauma-informed design of the new spaces.

Several additional projects are already underway at New Life Center to further enhance safety and support for survivors.

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Goodyear salon celebrates 3 years of growth

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Olivine Salon in Goodyear is celebrating its third anniversary, reflecting on a journey of growth, hard work, and community building. Founded by Stephanie Smith, a hairstylist with two decades of experience, the salon has grown from a small business with two employees to a thriving establishment with 25 staff members.



Stephanie Smith

Smith purchased the salon three years ago, unaware of the challenges that lay ahead. What started as a modest endeavor has evolved into a business centered on empowerment, mentorship, and exceptional client service.

"I went into it totally blind," Smith said. "I thought, 'How hard can it be?' But I've always been an entrepreneur... and I knew I wanted to create a place where stylists would want to work."

Olivine Salon offers a full range of services, including haircuts, color, perms, smoothing treatments, extensions, and waxing. Smith emphasizes that the salon is about more than just beauty, Smith said it is about fostering confidence and a positive environment.

"If you're having a bad day, come in, get a blowout, and we'll do our best to lift you up," Smith said. "It's all about

creating a space where everyone feels supported."

In addition to its client-focused mission, the salon has become known for its emphasis on mentorship. Smith, who has mentored many new stylists, believes in fostering a collaborative work environment where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth.

"We want our stylists to feel valued, supported, and empowered," Smith said. "We've created a culture where everyone can learn without being afraid to ask for help."

Olivine operates on a commission-based model but unlike many salons, offers its stylists benefits and flexible schedules. Smith said she strives to provide the best pay and working conditions in the West Valley.

Now, with a new location secured in Goodyear, Smith is ready to expand. Smith said the second salon will mirror the success of the original location while continuing to foster a supportive, growth-oriented culture.

To celebrate the anniversary, Olivine Salon hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony and anniversary party with light snacks, local vendors, raffles, and giveaways.

"We didn't have anyone to celebrate with in the beginning, but now we have a whole community," Smith said. "And that's something worth celebrating."

Visit olivinesalon.com.



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Goodyear named Unified Responder Community

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The nonprofit Sounds of Autism has designated the city of Goodyear as a Unified Responder Community.

This title is given to a city whose mayor, city council members, leaders within the police and fire departments, leaders within resource and recreation centers, K-12 school leaders, and many nonprofit organizations have collectively committed to working together to create a more sustainable adaptive community. The Goodyear partners in the U.R.C. effort include Palm Valley Church of Goodyear, AZ Community Impact, Agua Fria High School District, and Kiwanis Club of Litchfield.

The U.R.C. is part of the "Arizona Celebration 2025 to Present," and is presented by Sounds of Au-



Sounds of Autism names Goodyear a Unified Responder Community. (Submitted photo/City of Goodyear)

tism. The mission of the program is to safely integrate autistic children and their families back into society through love and support one step and city at a time.

Sounds of Autism states that there is a critical need for more progressive early intervention to adult life solution-based programs. To meet those needs the organization

offers courses on life, job, safety, socialization, transportation, and independent living skills.

Visit soundsofautism.org for more information.



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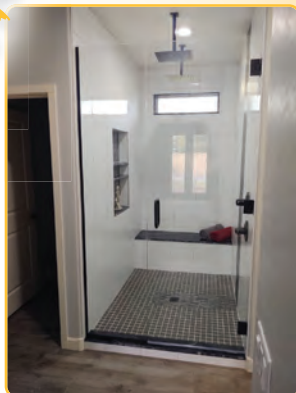
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Care

- From page 10

Memory Cafes provide a welcoming space for participants to socialize, engage in interactive activities like music or arts, and connect with others who understand their experiences.

With Morgan's help, the following Memory Cafés are scheduled to launch in the West Valley this fall:

The Goodyear Memory Café will meet 10-11:30 a.m. at 255 N. Litchfield Road on the first Tuesday of every month.

The Avondale Memory Café will meet 1-2:30 p.m. at 995 E. Riley Drive every third Tuesday of every month, starting Sept. 16

The two new locations join a host of over 12 Memory cafes in Arizona with regular meetings in Fountain Hills, Cave Creek, Mesa, Scottsdale, Pinetop, Tempe, Chandler, Buckeye, Glendale, Surprise and Phoenix.

The need for community support is more critical than ever, with over 37 million Americans in caregiving roles in 2023, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These unpaid caregivers often provide dozens of hours of assistance each week, a role that can be both rewarding and incredibly demanding.

"Caregiving can be incredibly rewarding, but it also comes with that high level of demand," said Katherine Steele-Watson, executive director of the Arizona Caregiver Coalition, an organization that advocates for and assists

caregivers statewide. "No one can give constantly without exhausting their physical, emotional, or mental resources."

Memory Cafes, while not a substitute for respite care, serve as an important social outlet for both the person with dementia and their care partner, helping to combat the loneliness that can often accompany caregiving.

"If you've never known someone with dementia, it can be scary," Morgan said. "And so this gives an opportunity for the person living with dementia to maybe make new friends and have a little fun, like singing songs, or doing some exercise, or doing a project in our arts and crafts."

"Respite is really unique to each caregiver. It can be just grabbing a cup of coffee with a friend, taking a walk, or doing an art class. What matters is that caregivers take the time to recharge," Steele-Watson said.

According to Morgan, for caregivers, the Memory Cafe provides a much-needed support system.

"It allows that care partner to have a place where they can express what they're feeling, and what they're going through in a safe space," Morgan said. "And know that they're not alone, that most people that are caring for somebody with dementia are also feeling the same thing."

Morgan's work at Gracious Navigation offers support for families seeking connection, respite, aids in transitions into different living environments, connecting families to resources.

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Litchfield Park earns recognition for financial reporting

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The city of Litchfield Park has earned the Certificate of Achievement in Financial Reporting, the highest honor in governmental accounting, for its Annual Comprehensive Financial Report for the 2024 fiscal year.

The award, presented by the Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada, marks the 27th time the city has received the accolade. GFOA recognized Litchfield Park for meeting its stringent standards for financial transparency and full disclosure.

"We are thrilled to accept this honor, which underscores the city's continuous commitment to transparent and accountable financial reporting," said Paige Peterson, director of finance and assistant city manager. "From daily operations to larger projects such as Litchfield Square, strong fiscal integrity will continue to guide responsible growth for the community we serve."

The Certificate of Achievement is awarded only to governments that demonstrate excellence in reporting and financial communication. An



Litchfield Park finance department, Monica Amaro, Paige Peterson and Rosa Juarez, celebrate the city's financial reporting award. (Submitted photo/Yosha Brunson Kuhl)

independent review panel determined Litchfield Park's 2024 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report met the GFOA's high standards, celebrating the city for clearly presenting its finan-

cial position and operations in an accessible and transparent manner.

The city's 2024 financial report is available online for public viewing.

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Memory

• From page 1

ation's Desert Southwest Chapter. Sharing her personal connection to the cause, McManus recounted her grandmother's battle with undiagnosed Alzheimer's.

"The dignity she deserved in her care was lost because we simply didn't know enough about the disease," McManus shared. "My passion for this organization runs deep. There is just not enough being talked about to help people get diagnosed early and get the support they need."

McManus said her experience with her grandmother fueled her desire to work toward improving early diagnosis and better care for those living with Alzheimer's. The session served as an opportunity to not only inform the community but also raise awareness of the Alzheimer's Association's ongoing efforts

in funding research and advocacy.

The discussion provided an in-depth look at Alzheimer's disease and its impact on both individuals and families.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, over 7 million Americans are currently living with the disease. This number is expected to rise to nearly 13 million by 2050. There is currently no single test for Alzheimer's. Diagnosis typically involves a combination of routine memory screenings, neurological exams and neuroimaging or spinal taps.

McManus explained that while dementia is an umbrella term encompassing over 100 different types of brain diseases, Alzheimer's is by far the most common, accounting for 60-80% of dementia cases.

She highlighted that a definitive diagnosis remains challenging, as there is currently no single test for Alzheimer's. Diagnosis often



Kenzie McManus shares the importance of early detection of Alzheimer's disease. (Mary Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

involves a combination of memory screenings, neurological exams, and sometimes neuroimaging or spinal taps.

The introduction of the new blood test, however, represents a potential breakthrough in this area.

"We are finally in an era of hope," McManus said. "This test could serve as a crucial early indicator, giving people more time

to make informed decisions about their loved one's future care."

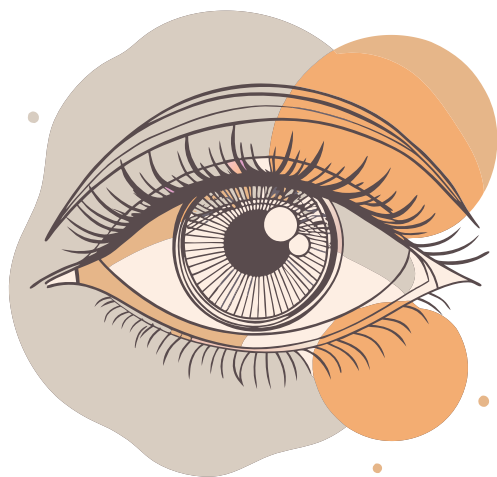
Early diagnosis is essential for effective treatment McManus said.

"Up to 40% of Alzheimer's cases could be delayed or prevented by modifiable lifestyle changes," McManus said. She emphasized the importance of regular exercise, a healthy diet, and mental and social engagement. "Maintaining a healthy lifestyle can lower the risk of developing Alzheimer's, and it can help manage the disease in its early stages."

In addition to these preventive measures, McManus shared an overview of the 10 Signs of Alzheimer's, which can help families and caregivers identify early warning signs. These include:

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life: Repeatedly asking the same questions or forgetting conversations.

• See **Aging** on page 30



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Aging

• From page 28

- Challenges in planning or solving problems: Difficulty managing finances or following a recipe.
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks: Forgetting steps in a routine, like doing laundry.
- Confusion with time or place: Not knowing the year or getting lost in familiar locations.
- Trouble understanding visual images: Difficulty with depth perception or reading.
- New problems with words: Struggling to find the right words or describing objects instead of using the correct terms.
- Misplacing items: Putting things in unusual places and being unable to retrace one's steps.
- Decreased judgment: Making poor decisions and acting outside of social norms.

• Withdrawal from work or social activities: Avoiding social interactions due to memory loss or embarrassment.

• Changes in mood and personality: A distinct shift in attitude.

These early signs can often be subtle, but recognizing them early is key to getting the proper care and support. McManus emphasized that the earlier Alzheimer's is diagnosed, the more options there are for treatment and care.

The session also highlighted the importance of community support in managing Alzheimer's. Shaeleen Corea, a community health specialist with Maricopa County's Department of Public Health, spoke about the role local initiatives play in providing resources to those affected by dementia.

"Alzheimer's can be a deeply isolating disease for both patients and families," Corea said. "Through collaborations like this with the library, we can reach more families, provide

them with critical resources, and let them know they are not alone."

Corea also introduced several community resources, including memory cafés, supportive social gatherings for individuals with dementia and their caregivers. Corea said these cafés offer an environment where families can find community, share experiences and gain information about Alzheimer's care.

"The key to supporting families living with Alzheimer's is not just the medical aspect but the community aspect," Corea said. "These programs provide a space for people to feel heard, to share their struggles, and to find strength in each other."

While no cure currently exists for Alzheimer's, both McManus and Corea stressed the importance of continued support research.

The Alzheimer's Association funds research aimed at better understanding the disease and developing more effective treatments.

McManus explained that research is critical to finding solutions, but so is raising awareness and getting people to seek help early.

As McManus concluded, "We have a long way to go, but we are making progress. Every conversation like this, every bit of information shared, is a step toward finding a cure and providing better care for those affected."

According to Corea, the ongoing collaboration between the Maricopa County's Department of Public Health, and the Georgia T. Lord Library continues to offer local families resources, education, and hope.

Tuesday, Oct. 21 Corea and Maricopa County's Department of Public Health will be back at Goodyear's library with representatives from AARP, offering resources to families.

Visit mcladaz.org for more information.

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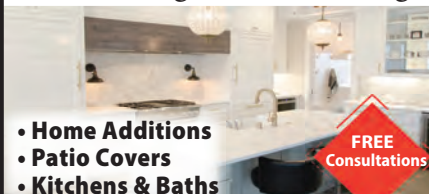
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