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INDEPENDENT

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Veterans find peace, purpose through horsemanship in Goodyear



Joe Consoli works with Goodyear's The Barn to put on a Veteran's Horsemanship class. (Mary Goldmeier/ Independent Newsmedia)

By Mary Goldmeier

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

On a calm Saturday morning, far from the chaos of combat zones and the clamor of everyday life, a small group of veterans gathers at The Barn, a Goodyear nonprofit equine program where the most profound lessons are taught not by people, but by horses.

Here, in the dust and open air, veterans are trading their service fatigues for riding boots, finding a unique path to peace and camaraderie through a complimentary, six-week horsemanship program.

They're learning to groom, lead, and bond with a herd of horses, applying the principles of ground-based horse-

manship to the challenges of post-military life, from strained relationships to the silent weight of trauma.

The program, an initiative born from shared passion and serendipity, is spearheaded by two unlikely partners: Joe Consoli, a Vietnam-era Marine

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GATHER, Homeless Youth Connection, Agua Fria Food and Clothing Bank work to keep West Valley residents fed and in holiday spirits. (Mary Goldmeier/ Independent Newsmedia)

West Valley residents open their hearts and pantries to neighbors this holiday season

By Mary Goldmeier

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

When the holidays roll around, 18-year-old Heather doesn't picture a table surrounded by family or the excitement of turkey dinners or tearing into gifts. For much of her teenage life, the holidays have been about finding a meal, a safe place to

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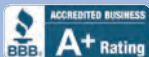
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Vote counts come back for West-MEC's bonds. (Submitted photo/West-MEC)

West Valley voters decide on West-MEC funding measures

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Voters across the West Valley weighed in Tuesday on two funding propositions from the Western Maricopa Education Center. Proposition 403 seeks authorization for a \$415 million bond to build new campuses, upgrade facilities, and expand programs, while Proposition 406 would allow the district to sell or lease certain district-owned properties to reinvest in educational improvements.

Upon printing, initial results were still coming in. Updated vote totals for both measures will be posted as they become available at yourvalley.net.

West-MEC serves more than 48,000 students from 49 high schools across the West Valley, providing career and technical education programs designed to prepare students for the workforce. District officials say the bond would not raise property tax rates, while proceeds from Proposition 406 would support new sites, technology, and equipment.

If approved, the funding would help West-MEC expand training in high-demand fields. Visit yourvalley.net or elections.maricopa.gov.

Litchfield Park breaks ground on \$5M library

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

City and county leaders gathered Tuesday morning to break ground on Litchfield Park's new \$5 million public library, a project officials say will transform the city's cultural landscape and serve residents for generations to come.

The 10,000-square-foot library will be built at 5390 N. Litchfield Road, near the historic La Loma hilltop. The new facility, expected to open in fall 2026, will replace the existing library on Wigwam Boulevard, which was built in 1979.

"This is not just about constructing a building, it's about building opportunity, creativity and community," said Debbie Lesko, Maricopa County District 4 supervisor, who spoke at the event alongside city officials and project partners.

The library will be about 40% larger than the current branch and include expanded program and study



City officials and community partners celebrate the groundbreaking ceremony of the new Litchfield Park library. (Mary Goldmeier/ Independent Newsmedia)

areas, flexible seating, updated technology and a new sorting system designed to speed up book circulation.

The project is funded through a \$5 million allocation from the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors' Community Solutions Fund, secured by former Supervisor Clint Hickman.

The Maricopa County Library District will manage operations in partnership with the city.

City Manager Matthew Williams said the groundbreaking marks a major step in realizing a long-held vision

• See **Library** on page 5

Southwest Valley properties recommended for National Register of Historic Places

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Two historic properties in the Southwest Valley, Rancho La Loma Homestead and Tal-Wi'Wi' Ranch, are on track to receive national recognition for their cultural and historical significance.

The Arizona Historic Sites Review Committee voted unanimously to recommend Rancho La Loma for nomination to the National Reg-



Lisa Hegarty celebrates Rancho La Loma Homestead and Tal-Wi'Wi' Ranch being nominated for the National Register of Historic Places. (Mary Goldmeier/ Independent Newsmedia)

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Library

• From page 4

for the La Loma property, land donated to the city decades ago with conditions that it be used for social, cultural and educational purposes.

“Ever since Paul Litchfield envisioned this community a century ago, La Loma has represented the character and history of the Southwest Valley,” Williams said. “We’re proud to honor that legacy by building something that reflects both our past and our future.”

The project’s path to approval

was not without contention. Last year, more than 30 residents spoke in opposition during a four-hour city council meeting, voicing concerns about moving the library away from its central downtown location.

Despite the criticism, the council voted unanimously to approve an intergovernmental agreement with the county to relocate the library to the La Loma site.

“It was a difficult decision,” Mayor Thomas Schoaf said. “But the council saw the long-term vision for what this hilltop could become, a true cultural hub for the West Valley. This

investment will strengthen our community and enhance the library experience for families here.”

The new library will anchor a broader cultural campus that includes the P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center, the Hilltop Park and the planned Agua Fria Arts Academy, all slated to open next year. Haydon Cos. will serve as the project’s general contractor, and ADM Group Inc. is leading architectural design. Both firms also are involved in nearby school and arts developments on the La Loma property.

“As you look around today, it’s mostly dirt,” said Drew Wegner,

Haydon executive director. “But in less than a year, this site will be transformed into a place where kids discover books, families gather and the community grows together.”

Williams said the city will seek community input on how to repurpose the existing library building once the new facility opens on Aug. 1, 2026

“This is more than a groundbreaking,” Williams said. “It’s the beginning of a new chapter for Litchfield Park.”

Visit litchfieldparkaz.gov for more information.

Historic

• From page 4

ister of Historic Places. Tal-Wi’Wi Ranch has also been recommended by the Arizona State Historic Preservation Office and is now under review by the National Park Ser-

vice, pending final approval.

If listed, these properties would become the first in the Southwest Valley to earn such a designation, elevating them alongside Monument Hill, in Avondale, as the only other recognized marker in the region.

“This milestone not only honors

the legacy of these properties but helps preserve the unique identity of our community,” said Lisa Hegarty, executive director of the P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center.

The homestead nomination is the result of a years-long effort by the P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center and its Historic Preservation

Committee, with support from the city of Litchfield Park. The committee was originally formed in response to grassroots interest in preserving Tal-Wi’Wi Ranch.

According to Hegarty, the success of that initiative sparked broader momentum to pursue a

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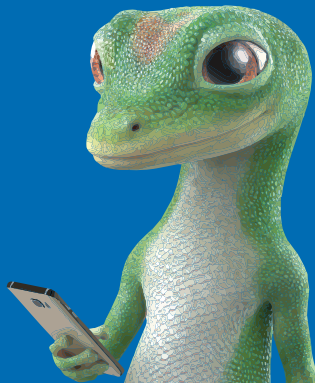



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The newest Litchfield Park well adds 650 gallons of water per minute to the water supply. (Mary Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

Liberty brings new well online to strengthen west valley water supply

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Liberty Utilities has received approval from the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality to begin operating its new Monument Point Well in Litchfield Park, marking a major milestone in the company's efforts to expand and stabilize the West Valley's water supply.

The well, located near Camelback Road and North Wigwam Creek Boulevard, is now online and capable of delivering up to 650 gallons of water per minute from a depth of 620 feet. It is the third groundwater source Liberty has added to its system in the past two years, following the completion of Well 19B and Marbella Well 2.

"The Monument Point Well was strategically planned to supplement our existing water sources and provide greater reliability for our customers," said Alison Vai, Liberty's senior manager of communications and marketing. "Each project we undertake is a reflection of our promise to deliver safe, dependable water and wastewater services, today and for years to come. The Monument Point Well is another example of this commitment in action."

Liberty acquired the well site in 2011 for its accessibility and close connection to the company's distribution network along Camelback Road. Although modest in size, the site was chosen for its

strategic location and suitability for integration into Liberty's growing system.

The new well is expected to play a key role in strengthening water reliability during peak summer demand and supporting drought resilience throughout the region. Liberty Utilities relies on groundwater for drinking water and actively recharges local aquifers with treated effluent from its water reclamation facilities, part of the company's longterm sustainability strategy.

"The Monument Point Well is a vital addition that increases supply during peak summer demand," Vai said. "It demonstrates our commitment to sustainable water management and aquifer protection."

Liberty Utilities serves customers in Litchfield Park, Goodyear, Glendale, and Avondale, where population growth and development continue to drive demand for reliable water service. The company said the Monument Point Well reinforces its broader infrastructure plan, which includes additional wells, storage reservoirs, and pumping facilities to meet future needs.

"Liberty's continued investment in infrastructure is critical for longterm reliability to our customers and communities," Vai said.

More information about Liberty's Arizona operations is available at libertyutilities.com and with the Arizona Corporation Commission.

La Loma

• From page 5

National Register designation for Rancho La Loma as well.

Both properties are closely tied Litchfield Park's development and cultural background:

Tal-Wi-Wi Ranch in Litchfield Park is a historically significant site that pioneered scientific desert farming in the 1920s and remained an agricultural landmark for nearly a century.

Rancho La Loma served as Paul Litchfield's winter home and hosted gatherings that united community members and spiritual leaders in the mid-1900s. Litchfield was the former president and CEO of the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, and a key figure in the region's 20th-century development.

"Paul Litchfield didn't just shape the business and agricultural land-

scape here, he shaped the community," Hegarty said. "That hilltop has long been a landmark, a place that brought people together."

Inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places offers more than symbolic value. Designation can open the door to federal preservation grants, tax credits, and increased tourism to the Southwest Valley, which lacks other nationally recognized historic sites.

"It will absolutely raise the profile of our local history and strengthen community pride," Hegarty said. "People often don't realize the depth of what's been here unless there's something physical to connect them to it."

The recommendation comes as the area surrounding Rancho La Loma undergoes significant transformation. A new library and school are being built nearby, and the Litchfield Heritage Center is preparing to relocate to a restored

historic building on the same hilltop. The city has also approved preliminary plans for a landscaped public garden in the area.

Despite the development, preservation leaders say the National Register application remains viable. The proposed historic district includes multiple original structures, such as cottages, a water tank, and a pumphouse, that are expected to be retained and incorporated into the new landscape.

"We've worked closely with the city and the state to ensure these elements are protected," Hegarty said. "There's a shared respect for preserving what matters."

The P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center, which sits on the outskirts of the Rancho La Loma Homestead has grown into a hub for local history and public engagement. With a permanent collection, rotating exhibits, walking tours, lectures and children's programs, the

center strives to connect residents and visitors with the region's past.

Currently housed in its temporary location, the center is fundraising for a \$3.5 million move into the historic Litchfield-Denny house atop Litchfield Hill. The new space will include a museum archive, research library, gift shop, and public programming areas. The capital campaign is nearing 80% of its goal.

"Our vision is to be the cultural and historical heart of the Southwest Valley," Hegarty said. "And having these properties recognized at the national level is a powerful step toward that."

The National Park Service is expected to make a final determination on the nominations within 45 days of submission, this process may be delayed by the ongoing government shutdown.

Visit pwlhc.org for more information.

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Residents plan vaccines ahead of virus season. (Submitted photo/Metro Creative Connection)

County officials remind residents to prepare for virus season

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

As respiratory virus activity rises across Arizona, Maricopa County health officials are reminding Goodyear residents to take precautions during the fall and winter illness season.

According to the Maricopa County Department of Public Health viruses such as influenza, COVID-19 and respiratory syncytial virus spread more easily in cooler months. Activity typically increases in November, peaks from December through February, and tapers off by spring.

The county recommends that everyone 6 months and older receive both a flu vaccine and an updated COVID-19 vaccine each year. According to MCDPH, people 50 and older, those who are pregnant, and caregivers of infants under 19 months should ask a health care provider about the RSV vaccine.

“Respiratory viruses can cause severe disease, especially in infants, young children, and older adults,” stated Dr. Nick Staab, medical epidemiologist at MCDPH. “Staying up-to-date on flu and COVID-19 vaccines is a simple way to prevent infections, reduce the spread of respiratory illness and prevent severe disease.”

Health experts say vaccines reduce the likelihood of severe illness, hospitalization and complications, particularly for older adults, young children and people with underlying conditions.

Free childhood immunizations are offered at the West Valley Children’s Immunization Clinic, 14130 W. McDowell Road in Goodyear, adult immunizations are available in a clinic in Phoenix. For appointments or help finding vaccines visit dignityhealth.org.

FROM THE COVER

Food

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sleep and a reason to feel hopeful.

"I have celebrated holidays with Homeless Youth Connection, and they were able to help me with meals and gifts so that I could have food for myself and receive gifts even when no one else gave me anything," Heather said. "HYC is an amazing organization that helped me in desperate times of need and always made me feel like I was heard."

Heather, who grew up in Phoenix, was referred to by a school counselor after opening up about her home life. The nonprofit serves youth ages 13 to 21 who are experiencing homelessness, helping them meet basic needs — food, clothing, hygiene, and mental health care — while staying in school and working toward graduation.

"HYC even helped me with my mental health," she said. "It made my life easier because I didn't want others to know how hard things were for me in my personal life."

With the federal government shut-down delaying paychecks for federal employees and Nutrition Assistance benefits for nearly 900,000 Arizonans, organizations like HYC are racing to fill the gap for those most at risk of being forgotten this Thanksgiving.

"Even when the world feels uncertain, everyone deserves to know they matter," said Robin Telle, HYC's community engagement manager. "That's what we try to show our youth every day, especially during the holidays."

A place at the table

For many of the teens HYC serves, the holiday season brings more anxiety than joy. The organization's staff say the time of year often magnifies



GATHER, Homeless Youth Connection, Agua Fria Food and Clothing Bank work to keep West Valley residents fed and in holiday spirits. (Mary Goldmeier/ Independent Newsmedia)

feelings of instability, grief, and exclusion.

"The majority of the youth we spoke to said they didn't have any favorite holiday traditions," Telle said. "They've experienced lives of unpredictability and housing insecurity. For many, the holidays are just another day to survive."

That's why, each November, HYC launches its Holiday Magic Starts

Now campaign, a pair of seasonal programs called Thanksgiving: A Place at the Table and Winter Holiday Gift Bags. Together, they provide grocery store gift cards, hot meals, and small presents to hundreds of youth across Maricopa County and Flagstaff.

The effort started years ago as traditional food baskets but changed as HYC listened to the needs of the young people it serves.

"We used to distribute food," Telle said, "but some of our youth didn't have access to cooking or had dietary restrictions. Being able to shop on their own gives them dignity and choice. They get to decide what they can eat and what they can't."

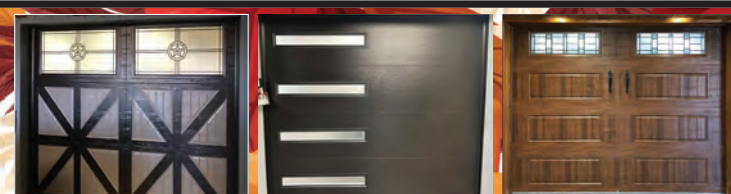
The simple act of choice means a lot to young people used to having decisions made for them.

Telle recalled one Thanksgiving at HYC's transitional housing site where

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ON YOURVALLEY.NET

BUSINESS

Data centers' thirst for cooling water raises alarms in Arizona's desert communities

State's data centers negotiate water use

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Arizona's tech boom has brought jobs, investment and innovation to the desert. But as the number of data centers multiply across the Valley, so does concern over what keeps their humming servers cool: water. According to Data Center Map, 162 data centers now operate in Arizona, with many more planned or under construction. These massive facilities, the digital backbone of cloud computing, social media and artificial intelligence, rely on enormous quantities of water to keep thousands of servers from overheating. In a state already straining to conserve every drop, the growth of data centers is colliding head-on with the



Arizona cities and incoming data centers negotiate water use as the demand for both water and technology rise. (Submitted photo/Christopher Bowns, Wikipedia Commons)

Southwest's deepening water crisis. Data centers in the Phoenix region currently use about 385 million gallons of water each year for on-site cooling, according to a 2024 report by Ceres. The report also estimates that the facilities indirectly consume roughly 2.9 billion gallons annually through electricity

generation needed to power their operations.

Keeping cool at a cost

"It's one of the most pressing challenges in our region," said Carrie Hidenbottom, an associate professor at the

• See **Data** on page 16

New Life Center in Goodyear receives a \$10,000 grant from Cox Charities. (Submitted photo/David Weissman, Katherine Nicole Photography)

Cox Charities grants \$10,000 to Goodyear nonprofit

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Cox Charities has awarded a \$10,000 grant to the New Life Center, a Goodyear nonprofit aiding survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, and human trafficking.

The grant is part of Cox Charities' increased giving in Arizona, with some grants rising to \$20,000. Cox employees personally fund the charity, raising \$540,000 this year for local nonprofits.

"We are incredibly grateful to receive the generous \$10,000 grant from Cox Charities. The grant helps ensure that survivors and their families are met with compassion, critical resources, and a safe place to begin rebuilding their lives. Cox Charities' investment strengthens our ability to offer trauma-informed, holistic care and make a lasting impact in our community," said Tori Lund, community engagement manager for New Life Center.

This marks the 29th year Cox Charities has supported local Arizona communities. Since 1996, employees have raised more than \$11 million and awarded grants to about 1,950 Arizona nonprofits.

Visit coxcharitieswest.org for more information.

HEALTH

Banner Health opens new multispecialty center in GSQ

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Banner Health has opened its newest multispecialty health center in Goodyear, which city officials say marks a major milestone for the growing West Valley.

A ribbon cutting took place Thursday to celebrate the opening of the 65,000-square-foot facility. The three-story health center is the first of its kind in Goodyear and offers a wide range of services including primary care, family and internal medicine,



Banner health officials and developing partners celebrate the opening of the organization's newest multispecialty health center. (Mary Goldmeier/ Independent Newsmedia)

• See **Banner** on page 14

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BUSINESS MOVES

1 Goodyear Fit Body Boot Camp

Goodyear Fit Body Boot Camp has reopened with new programs and a ribbon-cutting celebration on December 8, 2025. The gym offers 30-minute, coach-led training sessions, including Fit Body Forever for adults 55+.

560 N. Estrella Pkwy., Ste. 15, Goodyear

2 COSIC LLC

COSIC LLC celebrated its grand opening and ribbon-cutting on November 13, 2025. The company provides warehousing, transportation, and freight brokerage solutions across the Valley.

10206 W. Van Buren St., Avondale

3 Trader Joe's

Trader Joe's has officially opened its long-awaited Goodyear location, fulfilling years of community anticipation.

14770 W. McDowell Rd., Goodyear

4 Villas Goodyear

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

870 S. Sarival Ave., Goodyear

5 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., Litchfield Park



6 Slick City

Slick City has launched its newest indoor slide park in Goodyear, delivering a high-ener-

gy experience for kids and families alike.
15305 W. McDowell Rd., Goodyear


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Trader Joe's opens Goodyear store after community celebration

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The wait is finally over for Goodyear residents who have spent years campaigning for a Trader Joe's.

The popular specialty grocer opened its first Goodyear location at 14770 W. McDowell Road, in the city's growing downtown district known as GSQ. The 13,500-square-foot store sits at the northwest corner of McDowell Road and Bullard Avenue, in the heart of the mixed-use development that city officials have dubbed Goodyear's downtown.

Goodyear couldn't be more thrilled that Trader Joe's has chosen to come to our great city," said Goodyear Mayor Joe Pizzillo. "This really is a dream come true for so many of our residents who've been asking for this unique grocer for many, many years. It'll be locat-



Trader Joe's opens its first Goodyear store in early November. (Mary Goldmeer/ Independent News-media)

ed in the heart of our growing downtown and will be the perfect addition. This announcement of Trader Joe's is a testament to where we are going as a city and that the most sought-after businesses are choosing to locate in Goodyear."

The opening marked the culmination of nearly a decade of community enthusiasm. Since 2017, Trader Joe's had topped every city survey as Goodyear's most-requested grocery store.

Banner

• From page 10

orthopedics, endocrinology, and a full suite of advanced imaging. It will launch with more than 20 providers, making it a significant expansion of health care access for residents in Goodyear, Buckeye, and the broader West Phoenix region. The new center is part of Goodyear Civic Square at GSQ, a mixed-use downtown development that combines public, private, and medical investments. Banner partnered with Ryan Companies US, Inc., Globe Corporation, and the city of Goodyear to complete the project.

"This facility brings world-class health care closer to home, provides high-quality jobs, and draws new energy to our growing downtown," said Goodyear Mayor Joe Pizzillo. "Your success is our success."

In addition to outpatient care, the center integrates Banner Imaging services directly on-site, allowing pa-

tients to receive diagnostic testing and results in one location. Services include high-speed MRI and CT scans, which will support more efficient diagnosis and treatment planning.

The facility also offers coordinated access to nearby Banner hospitals and specialists, including Banner Estrella Medical Center, creating a seamless referral network across the region.

Dr. Shiva Birdi, CEO of Banner Medical Group, described the new location as a reflection of Banner's long-term investment in the community.

"A year ago, this was just dirt," Birdi said. "Today, it's a center for healing where people will find care in their community... We're going to take care of this community, and we're going to grow with you."

The health center is expected to serve tens of thousands of patients annually and is designed to expand with the community. The opening marks the first medical project within the GSQ development.

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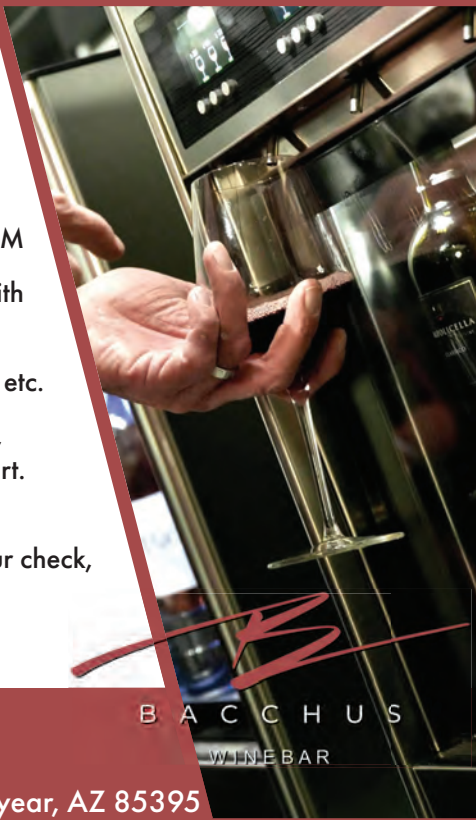
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Data

• From page 10

University of Arizona who studies water and energy use in tech infrastructure. “Communities are worried that data centers are especially going to take all of the water and energy in those areas.” According to Hiddenbottom’s 2022 study, “Water-Energy Tradeoffs in Data Centers: A Case Study in Hot-Arid Climates,” servers inside a data center run continuously, generating immense heat that must be removed to prevent component failures. Most large-scale facilities use evaporative cooling, a process that sprays or circulates water through cooling towers to absorb and expel heat. The method is energy-efficient, a crucial benefit in Arizona’s power-hungry summers, but it comes with a trade-off. The water used evaporates into the atmosphere and cannot be recovered. Once it’s gone, it’s gone for good. A single large data center can consume millions of gallons of water per day, permanently removing that water from the local cycle. Microsoft, Oracle, Meta, Lumen, and CenterSquare data centers across the Valley did not respond to requests for comment regarding their cooling methods for local data centers.

A growing thirst

Clustering water-intensive facilities in the Phoenix area has concerned planners and researchers. The region relies on stressed sources like the Colorado River and underground aquifers that run the risk of being depleted if overused. As dozens of new data centers come online during the next few years, it could strain municipal water systems designed long before the digital economy arrived. “The reality is, there’s so much demand, the computing needs are skyrocketing,” Hiddenbottom said. “With a lack of innovation on the infrastructure side, there’s no immediate chance coming.” In the Phoenix area, researchers

from the University of Arizona, including Leila Karimi, have analyzed the water-energy trade-off that defines how data centers operate. Their research, “A Case Study in Hot-Arid Climates,” compared two facilities using different cooling technologies, one air-cooled, one water-cooled and found no perfect solution. The data center that used air-cooled chillers consumed far less water but significantly more electricity. The data center that used water-cooled chillers and evaporative cooling consumed far less power but much more water. The more energy-efficient a system is, the less water-efficient it tends to be, and vice versa, experts say. “The study shows a clear inverse relationship,” Karimi said. “Saving energy often comes at the expense of higher water consumption, especially in hot, arid regions like Phoenix.” Researchers found hybrid systems, which switch between evaporative and air cooling depending on weather conditions, offer the best compromise. Cities hold leverage and risk

In Arizona, oversight of industrial water use is split between the Arizona Department of Water Resources and local municipalities. ADWR’s Douglas MacEachern said the agency’s authority extends primarily to large cooling towers, which fall under “Program Code 18” regulations. “Such cooling towers are subject to standard conservation requirements stipulated by the management plan of the active management area where the facility operates,” he said. Beyond those requirements, cities themselves decide how to allocate water to new tech facilities. “Each city maintains its own diverse and robust water portfolio that includes contingency supplies,” MacEachern said. “If a city wants to build a new data center or tech facility, it is up to its discretion based on its own available resources.”

• See **Water** on page 17

Water

• From page 16

That discretion, however, means each city bears the responsibility, and potential consequences, of bringing in high-water-use industries. In Goodyear, where several data centers have recently opened, city officials say they have worked to balance growth with water protection. “We look at it just like a financial budget,” said Barbara Chappell, Goodyear’s water services director. “We only have so much money to go around, or water in this instance. And so we give a developer a budget for a parcel.” Goodyear’s Water Resources Allocation Policy requires high-water users like data centers to justify their demand and fit within the city’s 100-year assured water supply plan, a state requirement for all designated municipalities. “The policy really helps us to protect those that are here today from what might happen in the future,” Chappell said.

Ray Diaz, Goodyear’s water resources manager, added developers must file annual water reports with ADWR and stay within the city’s water designations. “We have to show every 10 years that we have a 100-year supply of water to meet our current and future demands,” he said.

Goodyear’s water officials said many out-of-state tech companies underestimate Arizona’s scarcity challenges until they arrive. “We spoke to them about the high cost and the scarcity costs,” Chappell said. “They were from the Pacific Northwest, so it was completely new for them.” After learning the Southwest’s economics of water, she said, attitudes shifted. “It didn’t take them long to see how really expensive water is out here. So they are now converting to a dry or air-cooled technology after all,” she said.

Community concerns and calls for transparency

As more data centers break ground, Valley residents have raised

questions about how much water these facilities will use, and whether that information is being shared. “When a new data center comes to the community, there is no clear, transparent communication with the community that this data center is going to use this amount of water,” Karimi said. Hiddenbottom agreed, saying while some operators are forthcoming with audits and data, there is often pushback from communities seeking more transparency. “Data centers are actually really open with providing us their data to basically do a water and energy audit,” she said. “But we need to be asking hard questions and standing up for the communities. We need to figure out, what are some things we can do to support our community and this critical infrastructure?”

The lure of the desert

Despite challenges, Arizona remains a magnet for data center invest-

ment. Cheap land free from potential dangers is a big draw, Chappell said. “They look for a place that is not known for natural disasters,” she said. “They look at land costs and they look for a power grid they think will be reliable.” The greater Phoenix area checks all those boxes: low risk of earthquakes, robust power infrastructure and ample land zoned for industrial development. The same climate advantages that attract companies — dry, stable weather — also make cooling them more resource-intensive.

Preparing for a digital future

Data centers already consume about 5% of total U.S. electricity demand, and that figure could rise to 12% by 2030, according to Karimi. In Arizona, the ripple effect extends far beyond the grid. “To me, water use, that’s even more important than energy,” Karimi said. “Although it’s low-cost compared to energy, its use is scary, especially in a water shortage.”

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MUSIC

Singer-songwriter brings country soul to Goodyear

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

For Calvin Rainwater, country music is not just a genre. It is a lifeline.

Born and raised in the deserts of Arizona and shaped by the shade of his grandmother's orange tree, Rainwater discovered his love for music long before he understood its power. As a child, he would cradle his grandfather's guitar and sing Don Williams tunes into the open air. Now, decades later, he carries that same weathered authenticity into every song he writes.

"I grew up in really small towns," Rainwater said. "But my roots go deeper in Arizona than just me."

His family's story stretches back generations. His grandparents lived in a Goodyear that was mostly farmland, and he was raised in Show Low and has grown alongside Valley development. Rainwater's connection to Arizona, its people and its history still informs much of his writing.

"I can still see a small town in a big city," he said. "That's just how I see the world."

It is a lens that he says has served him well. His songs lean into the quiet power of rural life: hard choices, long nights, and the fleeting beauty of simplicity.

Though he has been a full-time musician for the past 10 years, Rainwater's journey into the music business was not exactly planned.

"I'd written some songs, and a few people heard them and really believed in them," he recalled. "At the same time, I was in a personal and professional crisis. I'd worked the same career for 17 years and couldn't find happiness."

Then, something clicked.

"This brings happiness to others. And it brings peace to me. So I just



Saddle Mountain Brewing Company welcomes Calvin Rainwater. (Submitted photo/Calvin Rainwater)

jumped in."

The leap paid off. Since then, Rainwater has toured across Arizona, released multiple singles, and put out a debut EP titled "Sinners & Saints." He has built a growing regional following not through viral hits or high-gloss videos, but through grassroots organization, word-of-mouth and a reputation for deeply personal, no-frills performances.

Rainwater resists comparisons, but others have likened his sound to the outlaws of old: Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson.

"I don't use a lot of extra emphasis. No backbeats, no flash. Just real, authentic songs. That's what I do."

For Rainwater, writing isn't an assembly line. It is a matter of feeling.

"Something will creep into my mind and just sit there," he said. "It eats at me until I write it. Then once I start, the whole thing comes out, lyrics, melody, it just kicks in."

But while he used to write more frequently, Rainwater is now selective about what he puts out.

"I'm not trying to throw darts and hope one sticks. If I release something,

• See **Rainwater** on page 19

Rainwater

• From page 18

it's gotta have purpose," he said. "I've gotta believe in it enough to sing it night after night."

That mindset puts him at odds with much of today's fast-paced music industry, where he says songs are churned out for algorithms, and longevity is rare.

"You ever notice how nothing stays on the charts for a year anymore?" he said. "Music's just moving too fast. I don't want to add to the noise. I want to say something when it matters."

Despite his growing recognition, Rainwater said fame is not his goal.

"I don't want to be rich and famous," he said. "I like what I do. I like making connections."

Those connections run deep. At his shows, Rainwater says he tries to remember faces. He learns names. He meets the husbands, wives, kids, and grandkids of his audience members.

They become part of his musical family.

"It just becomes this huge network," he said. "And I think that's the real part of music. That's what it should be."

Rainwater said his shows are not about theatrics or crowd work. He does not spend five minutes between each song telling stories or cracking jokes.

"I let the music speak for itself," he said. "If something connects with someone and I feel it, then yeah, I'll chat or joke for a bit. But mostly, it's about the music."

And while he will take requests if he knows and likes the song, Rainwater said he will not fake it for the sake of a tip jar.

"I'm not a jukebox," he said.

Behind the scenes, Rainwater wears a dozen hats: musician, booking agent, roadie, driver, customer service rep, and small business owner.

Visit calvinrainwater.com for more information.

County parks launch annual 100 miles in 100 days challenge

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Estrella Mountain Regional Park and Maricopa County are encouraging residents to get outside as the weather cools down.

The 100 Miles in 100 Days Challenge returns encouraging hikers, runners, cyclists, and horseback riders to log 100 or 200 miles on county trails by Feb. 8, 2026. Last season, 610 participants completed the challenge, collectively covering more than 101,000 miles across regional parks and trails.

"With more than 600 miles of trails to explore, Maricopa County's parks are the perfect place to get outdoors and enjoy the season," Parks and Recreation Director Jennifer Waller said. "This challenge gives everyone a reason to stay active and connect with the natural beauty around us."

Participants can choose from mul-

tiply activity categories: hikers and runners must complete 100 miles, while mountain and e-bikers or horseback riders are asked to complete 200. Those who mix activities must complete at least 75% of their total mileage in one category.

Trekkers are required to visit at least three of the county's 11 regional parks to qualify. Participants must record their progress using the county's 100 Miles in 100 Days app. Mileage must be submitted by 4 p.m. Feb. 8, when the system closes for the season.

Everyone who completes the challenge receives a limited-edition T-shirt, and finishers are entered into a drawing for an annual park pass and \$25 Nature Center retail voucher.

For full program guidelines and registration, visit maricopacountyparks.net.

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THINGS TO DO

The evolution of television photojournalism, lecture

10 a.m. on Thursday, Nov.
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Goodyear City Hall, 1900
N. Civic Square, Goodyear

Cost: Free

What to expect: Former
KPNX photojournalist Chuck
Emmert shares stories and in-
sights tracing the history of
television photojournalism in
Phoenix, from early technology
to major news events.

Thanksgiving at Litchfield's

2-6 p.m. on Thursday, Nov.
27

Litchfield's Restaurant at
The Wigwam, 300 E. Wigwam
Blvd., Litchfield Park

Cost: Starting at \$119 for
adults, \$30 for children

What to expect: A three-
course prix fixe Thanksgiving
menu featuring seasonal clas-
sics.

Tree lighting at The Wigwam

5-8 p.m. on Friday, Nov.
28

The Wigwam Front Lawn,
300 E. Wigwam Blvd., Litch-
field Park

Cost: Free

What to expect: Santa ar-
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Wigwam Christmas Tree, fol-
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IN BRIEF



Litchfield Park celebrates Las Posadas. (Submit-
ted photo/PWLHC)

Annual Las Posadas event returns to Litchfield

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The P.W. Litchfield Heritage
Center will host the fifth annual Las
Posadas of Litchfield Park: A Journey
Together to the Mission from 4:30 to
8 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 6, at the orig-
inal St. Thomas Aquinas Mission
Church on Neolin Avenue and Wig-
wam Boulevard.

The evening event, held in part-
nership with Ballet Folklorico Espe-
ranza, celebrates the Southwest Val-
ley's cultural heritage and the historic
origins of the St. Thomas Aquinas
Mission. The traditional Las Posadas
procession, which reenacts the catho-
lic story of a search for shelter ahead
of the nativity scene, will begin at
5:30 p.m. along Wigwam Boulevard
and conclude with a community fies-
ta featuring entertainment, displays,
vendors, food trucks and crafts.

Visit pwlhc.org for more informa-
tion.

EVENTS

Fall brings series of wine festivals to Phoenix area

With cooler temperatures, it's festival time in the Valley, particularly for those who like wine.

There are six upcoming wine festivals stretching from the Phoenix area up to Willcox in northern Arizona for those looking to partake in something off the vine, courtesy of Arizona Wine Events, Vermillion Productions and Wilcox Wine Country.

Each festival will have different award-winning local wineries in attendance, nationally renowned artists from across the U.S., live entertainment and local eateries.

The lineup is:

Nov. 21-23: The 16th Annual Sonoran Fine Art & Wine Festival

A three-day festival in Cave Creek will feature open-air shopping, fine



The Westworld Art & Wine Experience is one of six wine festivals in the Valley and around the state that will occur through the end of the year. (Submitted photo/Vermillion Productions)

wine tastings, patio dining, and live musical entertainment. Local and regional artists will showcase their work, and a variety of Arizona wineries will be in attendance for wine tasting.

Dec. 5-7: Wigwam Holiday Festival of the Arts

This three-day event at the historic

Wigwam Resort in Litchfield Park provides a weekend of art, entertainment, and festive cheer.

Guests are invited to enjoy a glass of wine while strolling through the resort's holiday display.

"The Arizona wine industry is bigger than ever but since many don't have nearby tasting rooms, festivals like these

are one of the best ways for wine lovers to find ones they like, and it's one of the easiest ways for festivals to connect with communities throughout the state," said Mike Pigford, owner of Arizona Wine Events.

"These events not only give wine lovers access to exceptional local vintages but also shine a spotlight on the arts through our long-running partnership with Vermillion Productions who showcases award-winning artists from across the country," Pigford said.

Entry to each festival is free and early bird tickets for wine tasting — ranging from \$20 to \$35 per person — are on sale at www.willcoxwinecountry.org or www.vermillionproductions.com. Tickets will be available day-of, ranging from \$30 to \$45 per person.

Every wine tasting ticket will include a commemorative wine glass.



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FUNDING

\$300K scholarship boost expands access for West Valley college students

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Hundreds of West Valley students could gain new access to college thanks to a \$300,000 funding boost for the Maricopa Promise Program, which helps low- to moderate-income residents pay for community college and complete their degrees.

The funding, announced Monday at Estrella Mountain Community College, will provide scholarships and support services for students living in El Mirage and Goodyear, two of the fastest-growing cities in the region.

The donation comes from Microsoft as part of a partnership with the Maricopa Community Colleges Foundation and the Maricopa County Community College District.

The Promise Program offers \$600 per semester for up to four semesters, along with mentoring, job assistance, and academic guidance aimed at helping students stay enrolled and graduate. Many recipients are the first in their families to attend college.

"Programs like this give students stability," said Dr. Tiffany Hernandez, president of Glendale Community College. "They make it possible to focus on school instead of juggling multiple jobs or worrying about how to pay tuition."

At Monday's event, leaders from Estrella Mountain and Glendale community colleges said the program's expansion reflects a growing need for affordable education options in the West Valley, where rising housing costs and limited public transit often create barriers for students.

Armando Villegas, chair-elect of the Maricopa Community Colleges Foundation Board, said the Promise Program represents more than a scholarship.

"It's about wraparound support," he said. "We're not just giving students money, we're helping them find jobs, build resumes, and connect to resources that help them succeed."

El Mirage Mayor Alexis Hermosillo said the initiative aligns with her city's longterm workforce goals.

"Providing our young adults with a pathway to education and stable careers is one of the most rewarding benefits of having partners invested in our community," she said.

While Microsoft provided the latest round of funding, officials emphasized that the Maricopa Promise Program is a locally driven effort designed to help students from underrepresented backgrounds overcome the financial and logistical hurdles that often prevent them from finishing college.

The Maricopa Promise Program helps eligible low- to moderate-income students in Maricopa County attend one of the 10 colleges in the Maricopa County Community College District.

Students can receive \$600 per semester for up to four semesters to help cover costs such as tuition, books, or transportation. The program also provides support services, academic advising, mentoring, career planning, and community resource referrals, to help students persist through graduation.

The program prioritizes first-generation and underrepresented students and aims to create pathways into high-demand fields like technology, healthcare, and business.

For residents of El Mirage and Goodyear, the program is available through Estrella Mountain Community College and Glendale Community College.

SCHOOLS

Liberty board weighs options for permanent superintendent search

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

After months of turnover in its top leadership, the Liberty Elementary School District Governing Board is weighing how to proceed with a permanent superintendent search, debating costs, procedures and transparency following the dismissal of Interim Superintendent Trevor McDonald.

During a recent meeting, board members heard a detailed presentation from the Arizona School Administrators organization and legal counsel warning against shortcuts or internal searches. The discussions marked the first step toward rebuilding district leadership after three superintendent changes in as many years.

Attorney Susan Siegel cautioned

the board that conducting its own superintendent search could expose the district to conflicts of interest and legal risks.

"I really suggest you not do it internally," Siegel told board members. "You are not equipped to do that with respect to personnel, and it can get thorny."

Siegel also advised that the board president should not lead the process, even in the absence of a direct conflict of interest adding that leadership involvement could give the appearance of a predetermined outcome.

Instead, Siegel urged the board to follow best practice by opening the search to all qualified candidates through an independent facilitator.

ASA consultants Dr. Nicholas Clement and Dr. Paul Tighe outlined

the group's rigorous background vetting and candidate screening process, assuring the board that their searches are designed to help the district grow its leadership and find the right fit for the community through extensive research.

"It's important to have a clean and transparent process that involves and engages stakeholders," he said.

ASA's searches typically cost under \$10,000 for a permanent position, Tighe said. He also confirmed the organization does not offer guarantees on a superintendent's tenure.

The board agreed to seek additional quotes from other firms before committing to a formal search.

The renewed search follows the board's Sept. 24 vote to terminate Interim Superintendent Trevor McDonald's contract without the re-

quired 30-day notice.

McDonald's appointment came after the board partnered with ASA to conduct an expedited search for an interim superintendent. ASA consultant Dr. Mark Joraanstad proposed a four-week process, and the board moved quickly to select McDonald.

Now, with the superintendent's office again vacant, the governing board is looking into restarting the process, this time to find a permanent leader who can stabilize the district.

Tighe said ASA's approach can be customized to include community input and multiple rounds of screening.

No timeline has been finalized for the search.

For updates, visit liberty25.org.



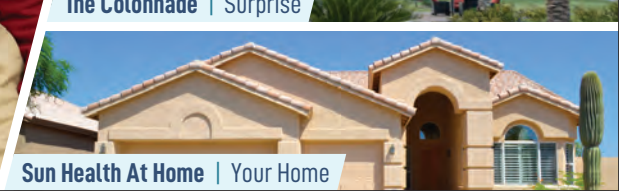
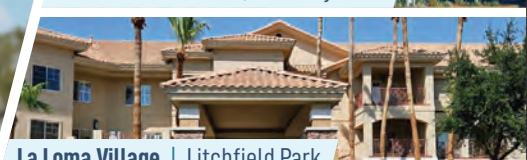
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FROM THE CEO

Enjoy Thanksgiving as you navigate ‘sus’ comments during family dinner

Happy Thanksgiving to our valued readers who make it worthwhile to publish community digital and print publications.

We appreciate your enduring support during this holiday season.

If you’re like me and you have teenagers, you may often wonder how the modern language keeps shifting into shortened words, or lingo that doesn’t quite make sense.

I’m still trying to understand the phenomenon of 6-7, and why my teenagers and/or their friends try to bait me to say it. And, not so surprisingly, it made word of the year, and an NFL football commercial. Huh?

Moving on, I recently learned fire now means it’s cool, and crashed out doesn’t mean passing out on the couch. Apparently, it means he’s mad or frustrated about something.

I asked AI what the rest of the popular slang words are in 2025 that teenagers and young adults use. Here’s the AI quick hits:

Bussin’: Describes something as really good or amazing.

No cap: Means “no lie” or “for real.”

Ate that: Used to praise someone for doing a great job, especially in a performance or presentation.

Sus: Short for suspicious.

Rizz: Short for charisma, a term used to describe someone’s charm or skill in romantic situations.

Bet: Used to show agreement or confirmation.

Iykyk: An acronym for “if you know, you know.”

It’s giving: Used to describe the vibe or energy something is exuding (e.g., “It’s giving 80s”).

Drip: Refers to someone’s great

Charlene Bisson (Independent Newsmedia)

style or fashionable outfit.

Bae: An abbreviation for “before anyone else” or baby, used to refer to a romantic partner or close friend.

Cap: Means “lie” or “false” (the opposite of “no cap”).

Glow-up: A significant improvement in someone’s appearance or confidence.

Mid: Describes something that is mediocre or unimpressive.

Big yikes: An expression of embarrassment or secondhand cringe.

Touch grass: An insult telling someone to go outside and be more in touch with reality.

Delulu: Short for delusional, used to describe someone with unrealistic expectations.

I’ve heard about half of the above, but not as much as late as 6-7, which is the 2025 Word of the Year from Dictionary.com.

Best wishes during the Thanksgiving holiday.

P.S. If you’d like to share your thoughts on slang language that’s not inappropriate, please email me at cbisson@iniusa.org.

PREP FOOTBALL

Elite Goodyear O-lineman realizes Stanford dream

By Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Football made Jalayne Miller a prized D-I recruit, as the 6-5, 305 pound offensive tackle received an offer from Georgia Tech before he played a down at Desert Edge.

But for all the doors the sport has, and is, opened for him it did not fundamentally change who he is or what he wants from a university.

Miller said he always wanted to study at Stanford, and truly committed to the university instead of more temporary football-related factors. He made his verbal commitment to the renowned university in Palo Alto, Calif., in June, less than three months after the Cardinal fired coach Troy Taylor and hired Frank Reich as an interim coach for this year only.

"I knew Stanford was a place I can get my education, whether I had to sacrifice anything football related. I know some schools say, 'You have to be this way.' Or some schools would not want me to take a certain degree path," Miller said. "Also some of the coaches that recruited me early on said to go for the school and not the coaches. Nowadays, it just changes."

He is ranked as a four-star offensive tackle, though he may move to an interior line spot. By now, Miller said he is used to the attention that comes with 23 major Division I college scholarship offers.

Early on, though, it was a bit bewildering for the big guy.

"To be honest, going into high school I didn't think football would get me this far. I wasn't too much

into the football scene college-wise," Miller said.

He said he did not really feel comfortable on the field until later in his sophomore year.

The end of that season provided the heartbreak that motivated him to become much more invested in his football career.

In the 2023 5A title game, the Scorpions trailed Gilbert Higley 42-14 in the third quarter. They came all the way back and appeared to take a 43-42 lead on a two-point conversion to end the game. But a holding call sent the offense back and another two-point try failed for a 42-41 loss.

"That left memories in my head that I still remember today. It still makes me a little sad," Miller said. "I'm definitely taking it more seriously

• See **Miller** on page 26



Desert Edge senior offensive tackle Jalayne Miller stands next to the Scorpion logo on the Goodyear school's fieldhouse. Miller verbally committed to play at Stanford and has been accepted by the university. (Independent Newsmedia/Richard Smith)

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INDEPENDENT
NEWS MEDIA

Allyson, 16

Miller

• From page 25

after seeing us get that far just to fall short. It definitely lit a fire in me. Winning the championship last year helped and we set the goal of going undefeated this year."

Before the 2024 season, co-coaches Mark and Marcus Carter stepped down to avoid probation on the team. Former defensive back coach Henri MacArthur stepped in.

MacArthur said Miller improved tremendously in all four years with the Scorpions.

"Our OL Coach GT (Terrance Liddle) has really been hands-on with him since day one, working with him to improve in all aspects," MacArthur said. "Now that he is back fully healthy it's been great to see where he is as a senior."

Desert Edge shook off a 1-3 start and a 6-4 regular season to dominate the 5A postseason and win its second state title.

Miller became a leader, though he brings his own approach to it.

"He's absolutely a big kid, very intelligent and fun loving," MacArthur said.

The Scorpions are trying to win again with a very young team. Desert Edge just completed an undefeated season and is the top seed in 5A.

Miller missed the first four games with an injury.

"I came back game five and was eager to get out there," Miller said. "I'm soaking it all up because I know I have only one senior year."

Since he came back to solidify the line, the Scorpions have scored 35, 29, 44, 58, 60 and 66 points. Unlike last year, the defense and special teams were responsible for only five of those 26 touchdowns.

Junior quarterback Blake Roskopf and sophomore running back Byron Brandon, in particular, have flourished.

"It has given Blake a lot of peace of mind and confidence knowing he will have a clean pocket and his blindside is well protected," MacArthur said. "That has been key with our improved pass game. And, as you mentioned, he is a big difference in the run game as well."

Miller made the adjustment to a third different offensive system in three years with aplomb.

Former Paradise Honors head coach Josh Goodloe arrived as the offensive coordinator and brought his Air Raid offense along.

"It's a smooth transition. I think Coach Henri did a perfect job of picking people," Miller said. "Coach Goodloe is a really good offensive coordinator. He made really simple for us, especially the offensive line."

He will have a full senior year, graduating in May.

However, the fun cannot start until the Scorpions win another title.

"The job's not finished yet. I want to finish it with my teammates and have a fun senior year," Miller said.

Then it is on to Stanford. Miller said his campus visit was amazing, including meeting athletics general manager and legendary quarterback Andrew Luck, who was a key factor.

Miller talked to the offensive line coach and met several players from Arizona.

He said he plans to study mechanical engineering. His grandfather has always been hands-on, building things from scrap metal and parts in the back yard.

Now Jalayne Miller enjoys the same kind of hands-on work.

His grandparents and mother instilled the importance of education to Jalayne when he was young.

"They said education will take you far because the game of football isn't going to last forever," Miller said. "Someday I'll have to hang up the cleats and I want to have something to fall back on."

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NEIGHBORS

Young artist honors heritage, wins art showcase top prize

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

At just 17-years-old, Kassie Silva is using her art to bridge generations.

The Trivium Preparatory Academy senior was awarded first place at nonprofit Catitude Arts and the city of Goodyear's Follow Your Art Jr. 2025 Fine Art Exhibition, a summer program and gallery showcase which featured 180 original works by 30 young West Valley artists. Silva's winning portfolio, "Consistency Within Filipino Culture," explores themes of identity, family, and tradition through a contemporary Filipino lens.

"I wanted to create something that would honor where I came from, something that speaks to my family and to people like me who grew up in two cultures," Silva said.



Kassie Silva celebrates a first-place award at Catitude's Follow Your Art Jr. 2025 Fine Art Exhibition. (Mary Goldmeer/ Independent Newsmedia)

Silva's ribbon-winning piece was a personal portrait dedicated to her grandmother. The composition included a modern self-portrait with remembrance and cultural continuity.

"In the painting, it's me with longer hair, in everyday clothes, standing

beside my grandma in her traditional dress," Silva said. "The idea was to show how our traditions live on, even as the world changes around us."

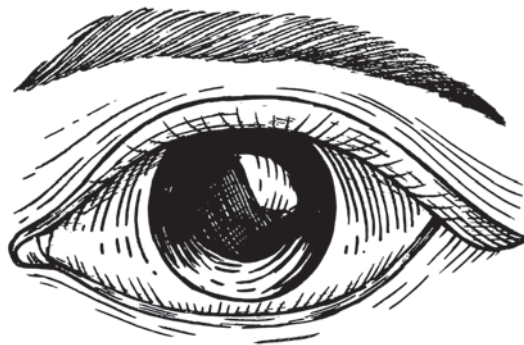
The piece struck a chord with jurors, who spent hours reviewing the student work before awarding top

honors. But for Silva, the recognition is just one part of what the program has given her.

"This community has changed me," she said. "I've grown so much as an artist, not just technically, but in how I express myself. I used to create based on impulse, but now I approach each piece with intention."

Silva first joined Catitude Arts last summer after learning about the program from her best friend. Since then, she has become a core part of the organization's volunteer team, assisting with events, murals and mentoring younger students.

"She's not only incredibly talented, she's always showing up for her peers, for her culture, for her art," said Dariana Trevizo, director of programs and development at Catitude Arts. "Kassie has grown into a real leader."



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Holidays

- From page 9

youth planned their own dinner.

"They created the menu, decorated the dining area, and came together as a family," she said. "For some of them, that was something they'd never experienced before. The warmth and love in that room was overwhelming."

For Heather, those moments of inclusion changed how she sees the holidays.

"My favorite tradition now is spending the day in pajamas and shopping for presents to share with my loved ones," she said.

A community response

That same sense of belonging and purpose is rippling throughout the West Valley this season, as residents step up to support neighbors affected by food insecurity. In Goodyear, a volunteer group called GATHER has been collecting nonperishable food for families served by the Agua Fria Food & Clothing Bank in Avondale. Their food drive was a grassroots effort started by a handful of Estrella residents after learning how the federal shutdown was delaying monthly food stipends.

"This is what community looks like — people coming together to make sure their neighbors have food on the table," said Jen Spencer, one of GATHER's founders. "Arizona families are resilient, but they shouldn't have to face hunger alone."

The donated food, rice, beans, cereal, canned goods, and baby formula, helps keep shelves full at Agua Fria, which has seen record demand this fall.

"We've literally seen the highest numbers this food bank has ever seen in nearly 30 years," said Leanne Leonard, the food bank's executive director. "It's heartbreaking to see how many people are struggling, but it's equally heartwarming to see how many others are stepping up."

Leonard said the food bank registered 450 families for Thanksgiving and more than 1,200 for Christmas assistance this year. Each receives a box filled with holiday staples, as well as fresh produce and baked goods from partner agencies.

Through the Angel Tree program and local faith communities, children receive wrapped gifts, a gesture that, Leonard said, restores a measure of pride.

"We put the gifts in red bags so parents can wrap them themselves," Leonard said. "That dignity, that chance to give something special to your child, it matters deeply."

At both HYC and Agua Fria, dignity is the common thread, a quiet but powerful force that turns charity into community.

"It's important that families can still share the joy of the holidays through a good meal and the sparkle in their children's eyes," Leonard said. "We want them to know they still matter."

At HYC, that philosophy goes beyond the holiday season. Staff and volunteers work year-round to help youth finish school and find stability. Each teen is paired with a youth coach who helps navigate barriers, from transportation and technology to healthcare and housing.

During the 2024-25 school year, HYC supported more than 700 youth, including 129 seniors who graduated and went on to college, careers, or military service.

"Graduation is often the turning point that allows our youth to break cycles of homelessness and poverty," Telle said. "But we can't do that work alone."

That's where community involvement comes in, through donations, volunteer hours, and simple acts of care.

How to Help:

Homeless Youth Connection: Donate grocery or gift cards, volunteer, or assemble holiday bags at hycaz.org.

Agua Fria Food & Clothing Bank: Contribute food or funds at affcb.org.

FROM THE COVER

Veterans

• From page 1

veteran and retired police officer, and Steph LaClair, a certified Equine-Assisted Learning Facilitator.

For Consoli, the program is a personal mission to give back to his fellow veterans. Consoli, whose 35-year police career included stints as a detective, SWAT member, and hostage negotiator, first discovered the therapeutic power of horses after retiring in California.

“I was looking for something to do, and I happened to see this lady on TV with a horse and thought that might be fun to get involved with,” Consoli said.

He started volunteering at a horse rescue, eventually participating in a veterans’ horsemanship program there.

“It was, I want to say magical, which sounds silly, but when you get a horse to follow you and you can tell that horse is with you, really it is magical,” he said.

When he moved to Arizona, he found The Barn and quickly became a volunteer. Seeing an opportunity to share his experience, he worked with leadership to establish the veteran-specific program.

Consoli serves as the program’s mentor, drawing on his background to create a safe, trusting environment.

“We opened the meeting by introducing ourselves. We each went around and gave our military experience,” he said. The rule, he stresses, is absolute

trust: “What’s said and done at the barn stays at the barn.”

Consoli said while many veterans struggle with post-traumatic stress, not everyone is ready to talk about it.

“We don’t have to deal with PTSD,” he said. “I’ve discovered that these horses connect with you, no matter how great you’re feeling, how bad you’re feeling.”

The focus is on the horse, giving veterans a tool to work things out internally.

“I saw guys cry,” he said, describing the session in which he participated in California. “And it was at that moment that they forgave people for things that happened years or maybe decades before.”

The six-week curriculum, which started Oct. 18, is designed to be progressive, building foundational skills each week. It combines traditional horsemanship with Equine-Assisted Learning, a non-mounted, non-riding approach facilitated by LaClair.

“Equine-Assisted Learning is not therapy,” LaClair clarified. “EAL invites individuals to participate in activities centered around horses to gain insight about themselves and increase positive thoughts and behaviors.”

LaClair, whose passion for horses was rekindled after an almost two-decade hiatus, found her niche in EAL, a practice that encourages curiosity, kindness, and resilience.

LaClair said the partnership with

Consoli was a serendipitous and perfect fit.

“It seemed natural. I could do the horse part, Joe could do the veteran part,” she said.

The initial sessions focus on safety, learning to read horse body language, and how to properly introduce oneself to a horse to establish trust and communication. LaClair said the veterans are learning that the key to leading a horse is patience and respect.

“You want to look for signs that the horse is nervous, and if you do, you back up,” Consoli advises. “You calm the horse down. Once a horse is calmed down, he’s yours.”

According to LaClair, the horses serve as a powerful, non-judgmental mirror for the veterans’ inner states. If a person is anxious, the horse will react. If they are calm and assertive, the horse will follow. This immediate feedback provides a tangible metaphor for real-life relationships and challenges.

The veterans program is a natural extension of the core mission of The Barn, founded by Elizabeth Trier in 2013. The nonprofit’s vision is to make horses accessible to everyone, regardless of financial means, and to foster mental, physical, and emotional well-being through equine partnership.

“If it has something to do with horses, we probably do it,” Trier said, detailing a vast array of services that include traditional and adaptive riding lessons, Horse-Powered Reading, and

community service programs for special education students.

Trier said the fundamental belief at The Barn is in the power of community and getting hands dirty.

For Trier, a major part of The Barn’s success is simply creating a place for connection.

“One of my favorite things is seeing people make connections; people that just stay and talk after their sessions,” she said.

This community aspect is particularly vital for the veterans group, providing a safe space to share experiences among peers who understand.

“Veterans feel safe among other veterans,” Consoli said, highlighting the importance of the camaraderie. “It’s a safe place to open up.”

LaClair echoed the sentiment from an EAL perspective.

“You don’t get better on your own, you get better by connecting, whether that is with other people or with our horses you are looking forward to that connection,” she said.

The first six-week program launched with four participants, a small start that the team intends to build upon. Though The Barn is currently covering the costs themselves.

“We intend to keep offering it free of charge to veterans,” Trier said, with the longterm goal of securing grants or donors to cover the operating costs as they expand.

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