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LITCHFIELD PARK/GOODYEAR

INDEPENDENT

Business

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Litchfield Park lights up the season



Litchfield Park celebrates the holiday season. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

A growing city preserves its small-town glow

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Litchfield Park shines a little brighter each December, when palm trees shimmer with thousands of lights, homes across the city burst into creative displays, and longtime traditions mix with new celebrations. As the West Valley continues to grow, Litchfield Park is

leaning into its identity as a community that values connection, creativity, and a classic small-town holiday feel.

It's a chapter in a much older American story.

According to the Library of Congress, holiday decorating has long been a way for families and towns to express joy and togetherness. From German settlers bringing the Christmas tree tradition to the colonies, to early electric lights in New York, to the suburban

lawn displays of the mid-20th century, each generation has found new ways to make the season shine. Today, Litchfield Park adds its own distinctive glow to each palm tree and decorated home at a time.

"We still want to keep our small-town feel, but in a way, kind of write our own little Hallmark movie," said Assistant City Manager Paige Peter-

• See **Lights** on page 27

Borderlands produce rescue turns food waste into community strength

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

As families across Arizona prepare their holiday tables, Borderlands Produce Rescue is marking nearly three decades of ensuring that nutritious fruits and vegetables don't end up in the landfill, but instead reach households that need them most.

Founded in 1996 by longtime Nogales resident Yolanda Soto, the nonprofit has grown from a small food bank operation into a regional force in food-waste prevention. Each year, Borderlands rescues 20 million to 30 million pounds of produce, food that would otherwise be discarded largely for cosmetic reasons or market oversupply, and redistributes it through programs including its well-known Produce

• See **Produce** on page 28



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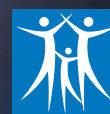
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COMMUNITY

Goodyear police invite an inside look at careers and public safety programs

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

When a car crash happens on a Goodyear street, it might be the fifth accident of the week for Officer Chris Carter, but for the driver, it is likely their worst day ever.

"It might be my fifth accident of the week, but for them it's traumatic. I try to remember that I'm here to help them through it," he said.

This week, the Goodyear Police Department gave residents a front-row seat to policing during a public safety information session, part of the city's ongoing Civic and Community Engagement program. Officers shared what a typical day looks like, from traffic enforcement and responding to 911 calls to handling major incidents, and explained the paths into law enforcement.

The department is actively seeking recruits and experienced officers from other agencies. Applicants must be 21 by the time they graduate the police academy, but there is no upper age limit.

Two pathways exist: completing a full academy or transferring laterally from another recognized agency.

"Most states have similar accreditation... as long as the state is recognized by Arizona, you can do a lateral move where you wouldn't have to go through another academy," Carter explained. He added that "probably 75% of our officers started at different agencies and then lateraled to Goodyear."

Hands-On training and youth programs

The session highlighted community-facing programs designed to educate and involve residents. The Citizens Academy, held twice a year, gives



Goodyear Police highlight career paths, training and community programs at public safety session. (Mary Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

adults a five-week introduction to policing with scenario training, demonstrations, and ride-alongs.

"People love the Citizens Academy. They wish it was longer. We actually added a week this year just to make it more interactive," Carter said.

Teenagers are not left out. The Teen Police Academy exposes high school students to law enforcement concepts each summer, while the city's youth cadet program, for ages 14–20, currently has 15 members.

"It's a very interactive experience. Cadets get actual dispatchers on the radio. They'll open a channel just for us," Carter said. "Three or four people who are officers now actually went through our youth cadet program."

Neighborhood safety and technology initiatives

Goodyear PD is also expanding neighborhood programs, including a traditional block watch, a crime-free multi-housing initiative for apartment complexes, and a Virtual Block Watch camera registry.

"Our Virtual Block Watch is not Big Brother — it doesn't give us access to

your cameras at all," Carter said. "Detectives can type in an address, see where the cameras are, and contact residents directly. It makes investigations a lot quicker."

The session did not shy away from the challenges of policing. Officers discussed arrests, parole violations, contraband, and the emotional weight of responding to residents during their worst moments.

"What we handle on a daily basis is probably somebody's worst day of their life," Carter said. "People aren't always happy to see us, and part of the job is taking people to jail... but I try to make interactions as positive as I can."

The department also outlined ways residents can get involved outside formal volunteering, including developing public events like "Crafts with Cops" or a "pickleball with police" meetup.

Through these initiatives, Goodyear Police aim to build stronger community ties while providing insight into the demanding, rewarding world of law enforcement.

Visit goodyearaz.gov for more information.

Goodyear officer honored after pulling woman from burning car

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Goodyear Police Officer Dakota Berry was recognized with the Award for Valor his actions earlier this year when he rescued a woman from a burning vehicle on Interstate 10.

Berry pulled a woman from a car engulfed in flames following a crash near 91st Avenue on May 25. The woman was later identified as Asharie Cheatham, daughter of Goodyear Fire Capt. Simeon Cheatham.

His heroic act drew praise at the ASIS International Phoenix Chapter Law Enforcement Appreciation Luncheon. Founded in 1955, ASIS International is a community of security practitioners representing virtually every industry in the public and private sectors.

In a statement, Goodyear Po-

• See **Honored** on page 6

Goodyear redesigns light display to more prominently feature menorah

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

A group of 15 community members and city staff gathered on the front lawn of Goodyear City Hall on Wednesday, standing among holiday displays as officials evaluated new placement options for the city's Hanukkah menorah.

After reviewing three possible sites, the group agreed the menorah should be moved to a prominent patch of rocks in front of the "Great Joy" sculpture.

The group also set a plan to properly illuminate the menorah with blue up-lighting for better nighttime visibility.

The new position will place the menorah and Christmas tree on either side of the main stage, ensuring both are highly visible and ADA-accessible throughout the holiday season.

The relocation comes after sev-



Goodyear moves its menorah after residents call for equal holiday representation. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

eral Goodyear residents urged city leaders Monday night to move the 9-foot menorah to a more visible location, saying its placement for the second consecutive year, tucked in dense landscaping and facing the parking lot rather than the public square, sent an unintended message of exclusion.

"I'm concerned that I'm not recognized, respected and valued

in the city's holiday celebrations," resident Jill Burnham told the City Council, noting she has raised the issue for three years.

"No Goodyear resident wants to be marginalized."

Chana Zaklikofsky, a leadership member at the Chabad Jewish Center of Goodyear, said visibility is especially meaningful during Hanukkah, which runs Dec. 15–22 this year.

"The menorah is a universal symbol of light," she said. "By displaying it in a visible, welcoming location, we affirm a message of hope, diversity and inclusion."

Zaklikofsky also pointed to a 1989 U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding the constitutionality of menorahs displayed alongside other municipal holiday decorations, noting the symbol represents freedom, light, and community solidarity.

Residents Janet and Richard Kir-

shbaum said they were "appalled" to see the menorah again positioned away from other displays, despite prior conversations with city leadership.

"This is not simply a matter of aesthetics," Janet Kirshbaum said. "It's a matter of dignity, inclusion and equal representation. We're not asking for special treatment, we're asking for the most basic standard of fairness."

Members of the Drossos family, Shanon, Demetri and Malachi, told the council they discovered the menorah only by accident.

"It was the first time we'd ever seen it, and we just stumbled upon it," said Demetri Drossos, adding that equal visibility is essential for residents who celebrate Hanukkah.

Council member Vickie Gillis, who attended the walkthrough, apologized to residents for the menorah's initial placement.



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Honored

• From page 4

lice Chief Brian Issitt said he was proud to see Berry recognized.

"I had the honor of attending the ASIS International Phoenix Chapter Law Enforcement Appreciation Luncheon... where Officer Dakota Berry was the recipient of the Award for Valor, for his heroic actions earlier in the year rescuing a woman from a burning vehicle on the I-10," Issitt stated. "I couldn't have been more proud to stand with Dakota, as he represented the rest of the men and women of the Goodyear Police Department, who work so hard to keep our community safe every day."

During the luncheon, the ASIS Phoenix Chapter presented Awards of Valor to officers selected from nominations submitted by their departments and reviewed by the chapter's board. The annual event recognizes law enforcement officers from across the state for outstanding acts of bravery and dedication to duty.

A portion of the luncheon is dedicated to honoring fallen officers. Families of officers who have died in the line of duty are invited to attend and are presented with a small monetary remembrance, whether or not they are able to attend in person.

The luncheon also serves as a fundraiser for the 100 Club of Arizona, which provides assistance to the families of fallen and injured first responders.

Berry's recognition follows his rescue of Asharie Cheatham earlier this year, an act that drew widespread attention after her father shared his family's story.

"What (Officer Dakota Berry) did was nothing short of a miracle," Simeon Cheatham said in June. "The fact that he happened to be

traveling back to Goodyear at that exact moment gives me chills. He wasn't supposed to be there, but he was."

Berry was returning from transporting a prisoner when he came upon the crash and saw that one of the vehicles was on fire.

"I ended up hearing the car horn honking and ran over to the driver's side," Berry said. "At that time, I realized someone was still alive in the vehicle. No matter what, I was going to do whatever I could to get them out."

Berry broke the driver's side window and pulled Cheatham from the car, suffering injuries to his own hand in the process. Cheatham, then a 19-year-old Arizona State University student, sustained burns to about a third of her body and underwent multiple surgeries at the Arizona Burn Center at Valleywise Health.

Issitt later visited Berry in the hospital following the rescue and thanked him for his courage.

"When I thanked him for his courage, he just said, 'I was doing my job, sir,'" Issitt said at the time.

Simeon Cheatham called the rescue a moment his family will never forget.

"I know in my heart that Officer Berry would've done the same for anyone, because that's who he is," Cheatham said. "But it just so happened that day, it was my daughter. And for that, our family will be forever grateful."

The community rallied around the Cheatham family during Asharie's recovery, raising money through a GoFundMe campaign to support her medical care and rehabilitation.

The ASIS International Phoenix Chapter said its annual luncheon not only highlights moments of bravery like Berry's but also reinforces the unity among Arizona's law enforcement professionals.

YMCA

Goodyear divers earn second place at international competition

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Eight divers from the YMCA Silver Fins in Goodyear represented the United States at the 12th Ulla-Klinger Cup in Aachen, Germany, earning a second-place team finish against competitors from around the world.

The event featured divers from eight countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Ukraine. The Silver Fins, whose team members range in age from 11 to 15, won 13 medals in total.

Among the top performances were Levi Berlyn, 11, and Haskell Fagan, 11, both AAU National Synchro Champions. The pair earned podium finishes in synchronized events on the 3-meter

springboard and 5-meter platform and also medaled individually.

Tanner Lange, a USA high diver from Canyon View High School drew attention for his dives that challenged Germany's two-time Olympian Jaden Eikermann. His routines earned applause from spectators for including two high dives rarely seen in platform competition.

"Their teamwork, courage, and sportsmanship made us incredibly proud," stated Bill Hunter, head coach of the YMCA Silver Fins Diving Team. "To place second among such experienced international teams shows how much heart these young athletes have, and how bright their future is. But equally important is how these kids foster positive relationships with divers

and coaches across Europe."

Several Silver Fins divers are scheduled to compete in February 2026 with the AAU National Team at the Eindhoven Diving Cup in the Netherlands.

Lange is also training to compete on the 20-meter platform at the 2026 World Cup. The Silver Fins are among the few U.S. programs that train youth in high diving, with three athletes currently in development.

The Ulla-Klinger Cup is considered one of Europe's major youth diving competitions. It often serves as a stepping stone toward the World Aquatics Junior Diving Championships and the European Aquatics Championships.

Visit the YMCA for more information.



Eight divers from the YMCA Silver Fins traveled to Germany to represent the United States at the 12th Ulla-Klinger Cup. (Submitted photo/Jennifer Brown)

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BENEFIT

Thousands gather in Goodyear to fight heart disease

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

More than 7,500 people gathered at Goodyear Civic Square for the 2025 West Valley Heart Walk, an event that blended community spirit, fitness, and life-saving education in support of the American Heart Association.

The walk brought together more than 75 companies and raised more than \$310,000.

The walk, presented in partnership with Abrazo and Sun Health, aimed to raise awareness of heart disease and stroke while equipping residents with skills needed to respond in emergencies. Attendees participated in CPR demonstrations, explored health education displays, and joined either a 3-mile route or a shorter 1-mile "Survivor Miracle Mile."

Aileen Carrasco, entertainment anchor and producer at Telemundo Arizona, kicked off the program by welcoming the crowd.

"This year we're going to touch more hearts, move more feet, and raise more life-saving funds, and continue our Nation of Lifesavers movement," Carrasco said.

Carrasco emphasized the urgency of bystander CPR training.

"Nine out of 10 people who suffer cardiac arrest outside of the hospital die," she said. "By turning a nation of bystanders into lifesavers, the American Heart Association is hoping to change that."

For event chair Ruben Castro, CEO of Abrazo Scottsdale Campus, the mission is deeply personal. He said his mother's experiences with heart disease inspired him to take on a leadership role.

Castro said those experiences shaped his understanding of how



American Heart Association fundraises for heart disease research in GSQ. (Mary Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

quickly emergencies unfold.

"We never know when something is going to happen," he said. "Recent awareness and training to help intervene is super important. Being part of an event that educates the community is one way I can honor her and make a difference for others."

He added that heart disease touches nearly every family and that the growth of the heart walk and the increased awareness will continue to save lives.

"This is my third time coming to the Heart Walk, and every year it seems like it grows more," he said. "Most recently a close friend, just three weeks ago, had a heart attack. Because of heart research and the care provided, they were able to revive her, and she's home recovering now."

This year's walk also spotlighted survivors, including 2-year-old Goldie, who was born with a severe congenital heart defect. Her moth-

er, Caitlin, shared their journey on stage.

"She went through three open-heart surgeries in her first year of life," Caitlin said. "Each step forward is a huge win, and seeing her thrive as a 2-year-old now brings so much joy to our hearts."

Caitlin credited advancements in research and funding for her daughter's survival.

"Many years ago, Goldie would have had a very slim chance of survival," she said. "The advancements in research and funding are everything these children need."

Throughout the morning, walkers rang bells in honor of survivors and those lost their lives to heart disease. Carrasco encouraged participants to reflect on why they were there.

"As I look over the crowd today, I know each and every one of you has a reason why you're here," she said. "Whether it's honoring a loved one, supporting someone fighting heart



Caitlin and Goldie advocate for heart research. (Mary Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

disease, or striving to live a longer, healthier life."

Castro said the community's involvement is helping build long-term change.

"We're raising a generation of lifesavers," he said. "Anybody can get involved, high school students, working adults, seniors. Everyone can make a difference."

The walk began with a countdown led by Goldie and her mother, sending thousands onto the route with bells ringing and teams cheering.

"With every step you take and every dollar you raise, you are building a legacy that will save and improve lives," Carrasco told the crowd. "Everyone, everywhere can help make a difference."

Visit heart.org for more information.

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HOUSING

Dominium opens 657 affordable apartments in Goodyear, expands access amid Arizona's growing housing crisis

By Mary Goldmeer

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

In the middle of Arizona's deepening housing crisis, one of the nation's largest affordable housing developers is cutting ribbons on hundreds of new homes.

Dominium, a national developer of affordable housing, celebrated the grand openings this week of Estrella Springs and Suncrest Vista, two new communities in Goodyear that together add 657 affordable apartments for working families and seniors.

The company will also open The Safford, a 200-unit family community in Marana, on Wednesday. The three projects represent one of the largest single-week affordable housing expansions in the state, totaling 857 new homes.

According to the Common Sense Institute's second-quarter 2025 housing update, Arizona faces a shortage of more than 52,000 housing units. With the median rent in Goodyear now \$1,848, according to HomeSnacks, affordable options are increasingly out of reach for many residents.

"With rents in Phoenix more than doubling over the past five years, Arizona has a significant need for affordable housing," said Owen Metz, Dominion's senior vice president and Mountain West development leader. "Tenant demand in Estrella Springs, Suncrest Vista and The Safford has been strong. People want affordable housing and high-quality amenities."

Despite leasing beginning only recently, the Goodyear communities are already about 50% leased, company officials said. Interest has been high among local workers, seniors and families seeking stability.



Dominium celebrates affordable housing in the West Valley. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

Located at 16895 W. Van Buren St., near Loop 303, Estrella Springs offers 396 apartments for families with rents starting at \$1,178 per month. The 492,000-square-foot community includes one-, two- and three-bedroom units featuring patios or balconies, walk-in closets, granite countertops and full kitchens. Shared amenities include a pool, playgrounds, fitness center, clubhouse, business center and outdoor grilling spaces.

Next door, Suncrest Vista provides 261 apartments for seniors 55 and older, with rents starting at \$994. The 247,000-square-foot community includes a library, theater room, yoga studio, beauty salon, community garden and poolside cabanas.

The Goodyear developments were built by W.D. Construction, a joint venture between Weis Builders and Dominion Construction and Architectural Services.

Goodyear Mayor Joe Pizzillo said the projects align with the city's focus on balanced growth.

"We're not the ninth-fastest growing city in the country by accident,

it's because we have a great team that values making this community a great place to live, work and raise a family," Pizzillo said.

"Affordability is key, not just for apartments and families, but for homes everywhere. This project fills a much-needed niche in our community."

The projects benefited from Maricopa County's \$2 million investment through the American Rescue Plan Act, supporting the construction of 10 units reserved for households earning 50% or less of the area median income.

Ruby Dhillon-Williams, interim director of the Arizona Department of Housing, praised the collaboration between state, local and private partners.

"These new communities reflect what's possible when strong partnerships come together to meet Arizona's growing need for affordable housing," Dhillon-Williams said. "Families and seniors will now have a safe, stable and affordable place to live, and that is priceless."

Dominium's leaders emphasized

that affordable housing is essential to Arizona's long-term economic stability.

Austin VanDerHeyden, government relations manager for Dominion, said the company's goal is to create quality homes for everyday people such as teachers, firefighters, hourly workers and seniors on fixed incomes.

State Sen. Analise Ortiz said affordable housing efforts are critical to addressing Arizona's crisis.

"Helping people save money on rent isn't just life-changing, it's life-saving for some," Ortiz said. "The best way to address our housing shortage is to build more housing, and that's exactly what this project does."

Ortiz's point underscores a growing affordability gap across Arizona. In Goodyear, for example, the median rent is \$1,848, according to HomeSnacks, far above the starting rents of \$1,178 at Estrella Springs and \$994 at Suncrest Vista. With the Common Sense Institute reporting a statewide shortage of more than 52,000 housing units as of the second quarter of 2025, projects like these provide a critical lifeline for families and seniors priced out of the market.

Mark Lambing, Dominion's vice president for the West Region, said each project helps provide stability and pride for residents.

"At the end of the day, this will be home for 657 new families, seniors on fixed incomes and local workers who need a place to live," Lambing said. "Affordable housing provides dignity. It's a stable foundation where residents can be proud of where they live."

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BUSINESS MOVES



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2 Family Care Center – Ribbon Cutting

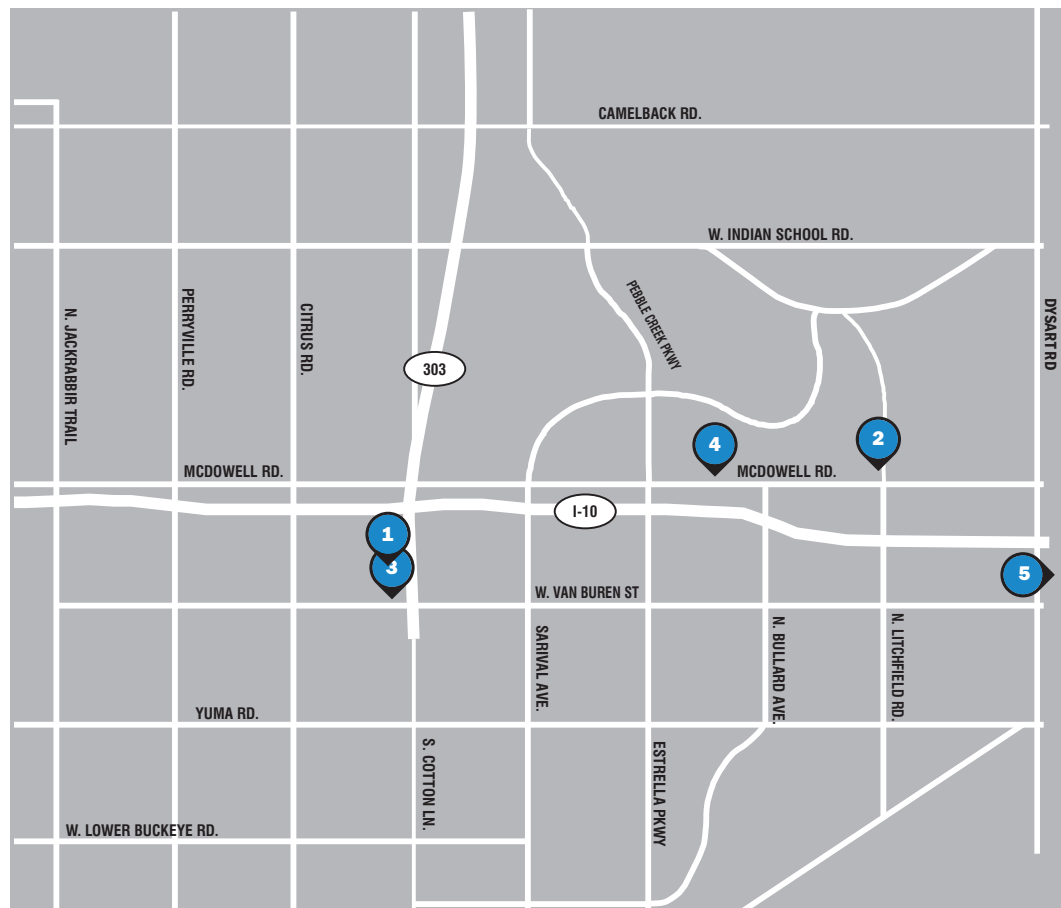
Family Care Center opens its fifth Arizona location with a ribbon cutting on January 22 at 11:00 a.m. The center provides accessible, compassionate behavioral health care for individuals and families in the West Valley.

1616 N. Litchfield Rd., Ste. 270, Goodyear

3 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



4 Trader Joe's

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

14770 W. McDowell Rd., Goodyear

5 COSIC LLC

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

10206 W. Van Buren St., Avondale



LITCHFIELD PARK/GOODYEAR

INDEPENDENT

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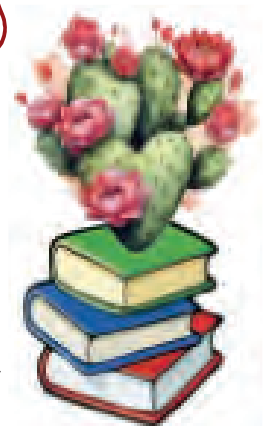
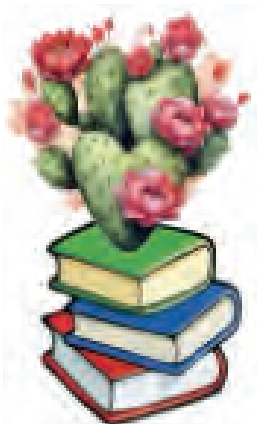
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Jan Cleere is known for her historical nonfiction books and her monthly column "Western Women" in the Arizona Daily Star. She writes extensively about the people who first settled in the desert southwest and the legends and tales of the Old West that she discovered.



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THINGS TO DO

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New Year's Eve at The Wigwam

Wednesday, Dec. 31, 5:00–10:00 p.m.

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300 E. Wigwam Blvd., Litchfield Park, AZ 85340

Emotional wellness series: Substance abuse

Tuesday, Jan. 6, 6:00–7:30 p.m.

Psychotherapist Robert Johansson explains how to identify substance abuse, understand recovery options, and support emotional wellness.

Georgia T. Lord Library – Programming Room, Goodyear

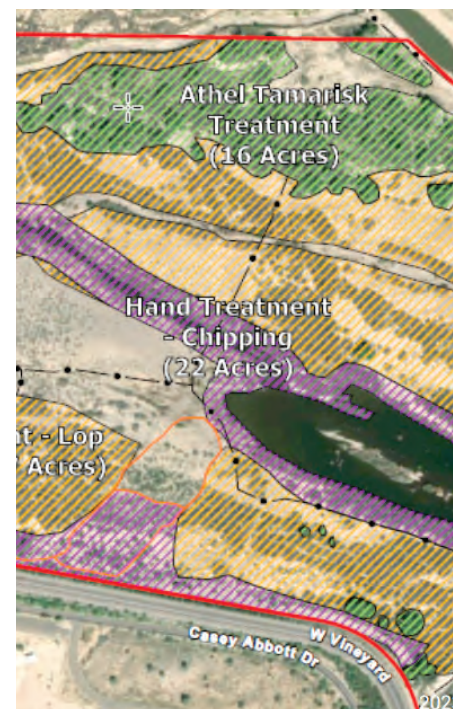
West Valley Astronomy Club: Star Party

Wednesday, Jan. 7, 6:30–8:45 p.m.

Enjoy guided stargazing with astronomers and telescopes offering views of planets, the moon, and deep-sky objects.

Goodyear Civic Square Park Stage, Goodyear

NEWS IN BRIEF



Crews are removing invasive tamarisk plants at Estrella Mountain Regional Park. (Submitted photo/Maricopa County Parks)

Tamarisk removal closes parking lot at Estrella Mountain Park

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Crews are removing invasive tamarisk plants at Estrella Mountain Regional Park, temporarily closing the El Rio parking lot through Dec. 31, park officials said. The park itself remains open to visitors.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, tamarisk, or saltcedar, can alter wildlife habitat, increase water use in floodplains and contribute to more frequent wildfires.

Workers are using chainsaws, wood chippers and herbicide to clear the invasive shrub. Visitors are asked to avoid the marked work zone for safety.

Estrella Mountain Regional Park is located at 14805 W. Vineyard Ave. in Goodyear.

For more information, visit maricopacountyparks.net.

ART

Chalk Art in the Park brings color, creativity to Goodyear

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The sidewalks outside the Goodyear Recreation Campus were covered in color Saturday as families, students, and local artists came together for the city's annual Chalk Art in the Park celebration, a day devoted to creativity, collaboration, and community.

Hosted by the Goodyear Arts and Culture Commission, the free, family-friendly event at 420 Estrella Parkway, transformed the park's walkways into a sprawling outdoor gallery. The event blended the casual joy of a community gathering with the energy of a live art showcase.

"This is one of my favorite days of the year," said Layne Ruiz, arts and culture coordinator for the city of Goodyear. "It's really about cele-



The Goodyear Recreation Campus is covered by community members in chalk art. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

brating art in our community, bringing professional artists and everyday residents together to be creative side by side. We want to make the arts ac-

cessible to everyone."

Ruiz said the event continues to expand each year. This year's additions included a tie-dye station,

face painting, and canvas art booths, all meant to give visitors more ways to participate. Organizers prepared nearly 200 sidewalk squares for chalk artists, a number based on last year's turnout.

"We had about 40 pre-registrations, but most people just show up the day of," Ruiz said. "That's part of what makes it exciting. You never really know how many will come, but it always grows, and the energy is incredible."

The event also served as a showcase for young artists from local schools who participated, competing for the coveted Challenge Cup, an award recognizing creativity and collaboration.

For Brianna Miranda, art teacher at Desert Edge High School, the

• See **Chalk** on page 16

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ARIZONA OWNED & OPERATED

Chalk

• From page 15

event was both a friendly competition and a teaching opportunity.

"We're here to have fun first," Miranda said, smiling as she watched her students fill in the outlines of their design. "We told the kids not to shoot for the title, shoot for creating art they're proud of. This is about teamwork and joy."

Her art club's collaborative piece featured a Disney-inspired design, a student-led idea developed and refined over several weeks.

"One of our students came up with the initial sketch, and our club officers helped finalize it," Miranda said. "They all brought their ideas together, and that's what makes it so special."

Miranda said the event allows her students to step outside the classroom and experience the impact of their work in a community setting.

"It's really powerful for them," she said. "Some of our students work jobs or have a lot going on in their lives, but they still take the time to come here, create, and support one another. It builds confidence and shows them that art connects people."

That sense of connection was echoed by Larissa Olsen, an art teacher at Western Sky Middle School and one of several returning professional artists. Olsen has participated in Chalk Art in the Park since she was a student herself at Estrella Foothills High School, where her teacher first encouraged her to try chalk art.

"This event means a lot to me," Olsen said as she worked on her piece, a bright, detailed river scene filled with fish in motion. "I've been coming back every year since high school. It's amazing to see how it's grown and how many people come back year after year. The West Valley has such a supportive art community."

Olsen said the collaborative atmosphere keeps her inspired.



Larissa Olsen draws at the Goodyear Recreation Campus. (Mary Goldmeer/ Independent News-media)

"A lot of us only see each other at this event," she said. "It's like a reunion, seeing other teachers, students, and professional artists all sharing space and ideas."

Throughout the day, children crouched beside their parents, tracing rainbows, flowers, and cartoon characters across the pavement. Teens worked in groups on elaborate designs, some spanning multiple squares.

Prizes were awarded in several categories, including Best Family Creation, Artist's Choice, and People's Choice. In addition to the chalk art, visiting artists set up booths to display and sell paintings, prints, and handmade crafts.

For Ruiz and the city's Arts and Culture Commission, events like this are part of a broader mission to foster creative expression and bring neighbors together.

"It's that community feel that keeps us going," Ruiz said. "We provide the chalk, the materials, everything so people can just come out and create. You don't have to be an artist to participate. You just have to be willing to have fun."

NEWSMAN

Former KPNX photographer recounts development of Arizona news

By Mary Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Former KPNX-TV chief photographer Chuck Emmert brought decades of Arizona broadcast history to life as he described a career shaped by breaking news, heavy gear, roaring helicopters and the improvisational spirit that defined early television photojournalism.

Speaking before a full room at Goodyear City Hall, Emmert delivered a sweeping presentation titled "Eyewitness to History: The Evolution of Photojournalism in Phoenix." The lecture was part of the P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center's ongoing Heritage Lecture Series, held six times a year in partnership with the city of Goodyear.

Emmert, who spent more than 20 years at Phoenix's NBC affiliate, said



Chuck Emmert tells the timeline of media development in photojournalism. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

the work was unpredictable, physically demanding and, at times, dangerous. But above all, he described it as a front-row seat to some of the most significant moments in Arizona's modern history.

A Job Where Anything Could Happen

Emmert began at KPNX in the early 1980s, a period he called the most exciting time to be in local news. Before the digital era, every assignment required heavy equipment, constant coordination and a tolerance for frequent malfunctions.

"Some days everything worked, and what you shot made air. Other days nothing worked," he said. "The reporter would look at the monitor and say, 'Where's my story?' and all you could do was shrug. That was the job."

Breaking news often dictated coverage. A typical day might involve racing to a fire in the morning, then battling a dust storm, and ending the afternoon shooting rare desert snowfall.

"You always had to carry everything, coats, boots, rain gear, because you never knew what the day was going to throw at you," he said.

Emmert recalled the advice of veteran photographer Phil Walsh, who stressed situational awareness during chaotic scenes.

"Phil used to say, 'Don't just look at the flames. Look behind you,'" Emmert said. "The real story was often the people—someone pulling a dog from a burning house, a family watching everything they own disappear. That stuck with me."

Emmert told attendees that early television news crews had to battle not only deadlines but the limitations of analog technology. Video-tape could jam, editing decks could

• See **Emmert** on page 18

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Emmert

• From page 17

fail and live signals could drop without warning.

"There were a thousand things that could go wrong," he said. "You learned persistence because that was the only way to survive."

The job also demanded rapid teamwork between photographers and reporters.

"Reporters had to write to what the photographer captured," he explained. "If they scripted extra sentences in a parks story to include the ducks and I didn't shoot ducks in the park, well, that wasn't going to work. You had to function as a unit."

Sometimes crews worked without reporters altogether, covering press conferences, groundbreakings or spot news alone and sending footage back to the station for others to script.

News in the sky

Much of Emmert's talk centered on Phoenix's pioneering helicopter operations. KPNX was among the first stations in the country to regularly broadcast aerial news coverage.

"Working in the helicopter was seven days a week for six weeks straight," he said. "Then the helicopter went in for maintenance for three days, and you started over."

In one example that drew gasps from the audience, Emmert described filming a high-speed pursuit while airborne colleague and pilot Jerry Foster simultaneously delivered a live weather report.

"He was flying sideways down Carefree Highway, doing the weather," Emmert said. "I was hanging out the door filming a teenager in a stolen truck. I can't believe we did half the things we did."

Helicopter crews were often first on the scene of fires, floods and rescues. They also traveled across the state to document wildfires and political events, sometimes landing in remote areas with

little warning.

"We flew an Arizona senator around during campaign season," Emmert said. "We'd land, pick him up, drop him off somewhere else. Looking back, I'm amazed we were allowed to do that."

One of the most somber moments in the presentation came when Emmert discussed the 2007 midair collision of two Phoenix news helicopters over Steele Indian School Park. Four people were killed in the crash, including photographers Jim Cox and Scott Bowerbank.

"That was the worst day," Emmert said. "They may have gotten too focused on their screens and not on what was happening around them. Not having a second set of eyes in the cockpit may have contributed. I don't know. But we lost good people."

The incident prompted new safety protocols and led stations to begin sharing helicopter resources rather than competing aggressively for aerial footage.

The changing news landscape

After more than 20 years at KPNX, Emmert shifted careers, taking a videography role with the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

"I'd been through four or five news directors. Each one had a new vision, and after two decades I thought, 'I'm ready for a change,'" he said.

Filming wildlife offered a welcome contrast.

"Instead of chasing fires, I was chasing elk," he said. "It was a great exit ramp."

Today, Emmert continues creating video content, including work for the City of Litchfield Park, where he applies the same fast-turnaround instincts he honed in news.

"What I learned shooting news is still in my DNA—wide shots, close-ups, reactions," he said. "The storytelling part hasn't changed."

Emmert's program also honored Carol Lynde, the first female TV

• See **Lecture** on page 26

EDUCATION

Agua Fria board OKs new medical academy, fire and rescue pathway

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Agua Fria High School District Governing Board unanimously approved the creation of a new Medical Academy and a Fire & Rescue work-study pathway, clearing the way for two major career-focused programs aimed at addressing local workforce shortages in healthcare and emergency services.

“These innovative programs aim to provide immersive, career-focused pathways that align with regional workforce needs,” Deputy Superintendent of Academics Phillip Nowlin told the board during the presentation.

The district’s Medical Academy will serve an estimated 800 to 1,000 students and offer three specialized healthcare pathways:

- A clinical, degree-seeking track leading toward careers such as registered nursing and medicine



Agua Fria board approves the planning of a new medical academy and fire and rescue pathway for students. (Mary Goldmeier/ Independent Newsmedia)

- A clinical certification track offering credentials such as pharmacy technician, ultrasound technician, surgical technician and medical assistant
- A nonclinical track focused on

healthcare technology, risk management, finance and administration

Plans also include a public-facing clinic, a medical simulation lab modeled on Banner Health’s Mesa facility

and dual enrollment options through higher-education partners.

District leaders said they studied long-established medical academies in Texas and California, as well as Banner Health facilities, while shaping the proposal.

Groundbreaking is anticipated in summer 2026, with an opening targeted for fall 2028.

The Fire & Rescue pathway, based at Verrado and Desert Edge high schools, will begin with Level 1 coursework in the 2026–27 school year and expand to a three-year sequence. The program will include field experiences, ride-alongs and stackable credentials.

The initiative is a partnership with Buckeye Fire Department and Rescue Ready, a nonprofit EMS educator. Students who complete the program

• See **Rescue** on page 20

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Liberty Elementary selects Sarah Schmidt as new president

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Liberty Elementary School District Governing Board voted Monday to appoint Sarah Schmidt as its new president after Michael Todd, recently reinstated to the board by state officials, stepped down from the leadership role.

Todd had previously resigned from both his presidency and board seat in October 2024, only to be reinstated earlier this year. His latest decision to step back from the presidency but remain on the board marks another shift in his leadership tenure.

The motion to approve Schmidt as board president, effective Nov. 10, was passed with three votes in favor and one vote against from Kristopher Kenyon, and one abstention from Todd.

In a separate vote, the board approved Bryan Cirrincione as vice president. That motion carried with four votes in favor and one abstention from Todd.

"I am humbled and honored to now have this position and work for all of

you even more," Schmidt said following her appointment. "Please reach out if you ever feel the need. I do not have a child in the district, but I try to attend whenever I'm invited. I look forward to



Sarah Schmidt

working with everyone."

Schmidt was sworn in as a board member in December 2024.

She is a Wisconsin native who has lived in Arizona for a decade and holds a bachelor's degree in biological sciences from Marquette University and a master's in biomedical diagnostics from Arizona State University.

Schmidt works as a clinical genomic scientist in research and development for a genetic testing company.

As board president, Schmidt will preside over meetings, set agendas with the superintendent, and serve as the board's official spokesperson.

For more information about the Liberty Elementary School District Governing Board, visit liberty25.org.

Rescue

- From page 19

will graduate eligible for employment with certifications including EMT, Firefighter I & II and CPAT.

Buckeye Fire Chief Keith Rhodes said the collaboration helps address national shortages in public safety personnel.

"It becomes a recruitment tool, early access and early exposure for students," Rhodes said. "We have to be a little more creative, and this gives us that opportunity."

Courtney Rios of Rescue Ready said the goal is to build well equipped, home-grown talent for local fire agencies.

"By the time students graduate,

they'll have everything they need to apply to a fire station," she said.

The Fire & Rescue program will be funded entirely through a West-MEC grant and will not affect school staffing levels, officials said. Costs for the Medical Academy are still being finalized as land acquisition and facility planning continue.

The unanimous vote clears the way for detailed planning to begin immediately.

District officials say the initiatives will help ensure students have access to high-wage, high-demand career paths while providing local employers with a pipeline of trained, work-ready graduates in the years ahead.

Visit aguafrica.org for more information.

NEIGHBORS

West Valley's Ron Rayner honored as Arizona Historymaker

By Mary Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Local agricultural leader Ron Rayner was named one of the 2025 Arizona Historymakers at a ceremony in Scottsdale. Rayner was recognized for his lifetime of contributions to Arizona agriculture and his impact on the surrounding community.

The event, hosted by the Historical League, celebrated Rayner alongside nine other individuals whose life stories have shaped Arizona's history.

Along with Rayner, the 2025 Arizona Historymakers included notable figures such as Bob Boze Bell, Diana 'Dede' Yazzie Devine, and Dr. Oliver Harper, among others.

According to Arizona Historymakers, Rayner's agricultural innovations have had a lasting impact on the industry, particularly in the West



Ron Rayner, Heather Rayner, Kim Smith and Ron Smith celebrate at the annual Arizona Historymakers ceremony. (Submitted photo/Carolyn Hartman, Historical League, Inc.)

Valley. As a nationally recognized leader in sustainable farming, he developed arid land double-cropping and no-till farming practices that conserve water, reduce pesticide use, and improve soil health.

Rayner also served in leadership roles across various agricultural and community organizations, including as a former board member of the Central Arizona Project, past chairman of the National Cotton Council,

and founding chairman of Electrical District No. 8. According to Arizona Historymakers, his commitment to supporting fellow farmers and improving agricultural practices has earned him respect across the state.

Rayner's family farm, A Tumbling T Ranches, has deep roots in the region. The Rayner family moved to the area from northern California in 1914, settling in what is now Goodyear and Litchfield Park. Over the years, the farm expanded from growing potatoes and onions to a diversified agricultural operation. Today, A Tumbling T Ranches produces a variety of crops in Arizona and California, including wheat, alfalfa, and cotton, and continues to be a leader in sustainable farming practices.

Visit historicalleague.org for more information.



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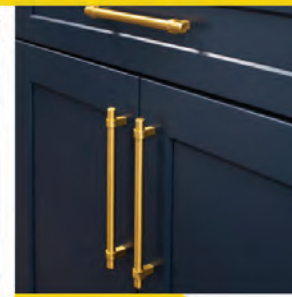
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VETERAN

Litchfield Park's Bill Simon earns place in Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

William Frank Simon, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel known for decades of military, civic and educational service in the West Valley, has been named to the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame Class of 2025.

Simon, who was born in Phoenix in 1946, served 27 years in the U.S. Army Reserve and Air National Guard.

He enlisted in 1970 after graduating from Arizona State University and later earned his commission through the Arizona Officer Candidate School program in 1977. Over his career, he served in Infantry, Transportation, Quartermaster, Ordnance and Medical Service units before retiring as a lieutenant colonel in 1997.

He also completed the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 1990.

Outside the military, Simon spent more than four decades in Arizona banking, serving as a vice president and branch manager for Valley National Bank in Phoenix and First National Bank in Goodyear.

His record of community service spans numerous organizations, including Civitan in Globe, Kiwanis in Litchfield Park, Rotary in Buckeye and the Litchfield Park Historical Society.

His veteran advocacy includes active roles with the Military Officers Association of America's Luke Chapter, American Legion Post 61 in Avondale and the Arizona Amer-



Bill Simon earns place in the class of 2025 Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame. (Submitted photo/ Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame)

ica250 Commission.

Simon is also widely known for his work preserving military history. He and his wife operate the 1st Lt. Frank Luke Jr. Memorial Museum and Research Center in Goodyear, dedicated to the Arizona World War I flying ace known as the "Arizona Balloon Buster."

Since opening in 2014, the museum and Simon's "Desert Warriors" display team have provided educational outreach to hundreds of students and adults across the Valley.

The Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame, established in 2001 by Unified Arizona Veterans, honors veterans who continue to make significant civic contributions after their military service. Simon is one of 15 veterans selected for induction in 2025.

Visit avhof.org for more information.

PREP SPORTS

West Valley Preps' Litchfield Park/Goodyear girls basketball preview

Compiled By Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The girls basketball season started Nov. 19. The Litchfield Park/Goodyear Independent asked the local coaches for their outlook on the season.

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How many years have you coached basketball? 17 years

What is your team's best at-

tribute entering this season? We will be returning five seniors who began the program together and have played in the last three state championship games.

What will your team need to improve for the season to be a success? We have been working to improve defensively.

Who are your team leaders? Seniors Bernadette Carranza and Aaliyah Rogers.

Who are newcomers to the varsity squad who could make an impact? Estrella Foothills senior transfer Chanel Yellowman and freshman Annalycia Sandavol.

What needs to happen for your squad to reach the state tournament this season, or achieve the goals the team has set? We need to work hard in practice and con-

tinue to improve. We are looking forward to having all of our tri and dual athletes back in the gym with us in preparation for upcoming tournaments and season.

DESERT EDGE SCORPIONS

5A Desert West Region

2024-25 Record: 5-21 overall, 2-10 region

Coach: Heidi Behnke (20th season as Desert Edge coach)

Top Returnee: G/F Aniyah Benn, Sr., (5 ppg, 3 rpg); G Zuri Williams, Sr., (2.7 ppg).

How many years have you coached basketball? This is my 20th season as head coach at Desert Edge High School.

What is your team's best attribute entering this season? Our

team embraces a growth mindset, striving to improve each day.

What will your team need to improve for the season to be a success? We will need to improve our decision-making and confidence.

Who are your team leaders? Seniors Aniyah Benn and Julissa Ortiz-Reyes.

Who are newcomers to the varsity squad who could make an impact? Sophomore Jashayla Martin.

What needs to happen for your squad to reach the state tournament this season, or achieve the goals the team has set? We will need to develop an identity that matches our team culture and per-

• See **Girls** on page 24



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Canyon View juniors, from left, Bernadette Carranza, Jaila Flowers and Aaliyah Rogers pretend to kiss the 5A girls basketball trophy after winning the state title for the second straight year. All three are back for their senior seasons. (Independent Newsmedia/Richard Smith)

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Girls

• From page 23

formance goals.

ESTRELLA FOOTHILLS WOLVES

4A West Valley Region

2024-25 Record: 34-5 overall,
10-0 region (4A semifinals)

Coach: Noel Hatchel (fourth season as Estrella Foothills coach)

Top Returnee: G Nemo Sidhu, Jr., 5-5 (16.9 ppg, 2.5 rpg, 2.6 spg); G Citali Pichardo, Soph., 5-5 (3.2 ppg, 2 spg).

How many years have you coached basketball? 33 years total, four in girls basketball.

What is your team's best attribute entering this season? Togetherness. They absolutely love being around each other. This has created a positive atmosphere and we gel really well on the floor.

What will your team need to

improve for the season to be a success? Maturity. We are incredibly young (four freshmen, 3 sophomores, 2 juniors, 2 seniors), and our maturity level is a work in progress.

Who are your team leaders? Tristin Fofoa (senior) and Nemo Sidhu (junior guard).

Who are newcomers to the varsity squad who could make an impact? Braylee Brown (freshman PG), Teej Sidhu (freshman SG), Tristin Fofoa (senior post).

What needs to happen for your squad to reach the state tournament this season, or achieve the goals the team has set? We need to rebound better. Lost one of the states best-ever rebounders and need to fill that gap quickly. Communicate better on the defense. With a young talented team, our communication needs to improve on the defensive end. We get lost on against teams that move in space.

PREP SPORTS

New-look Millennium boys basketball enters year as favorite

Compiled By Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The boys basketball season started Nov. 19. The Litchfield Park/Goodyear Independent asked the local coaches for their outlook on the season.

MILLENNIUM TIGERS

5A Central Region

2024-25 Record: 20-8 overall, 7-1 region (Open Division semifinals)

Coach: Rich Thornton (first season as Millennium coach)

Top Returnee: F G/F Cameron Holmes, Sr., 6-6 (committed to Arizona); G Adrian Higuera, Jr., 6-1.

How many years have you coached basketball? 15th season of high school

What is your team's best attribute entering this season? Versatility, a lot of guys who have multiple



Millennium junior wing Cameron Holmes prepares to shoot a free throw during a boys basketball Open Division second round game against Canyon View Feb. 21, 2025 in Goodyear. (For Independent Newsmedia/Courtesy Mason Norris)

skill sets and can guard multiple positions.

What will your team need to improve for the season to be a success? Developing depth and rebounding.

Who are your team leaders? Seniors Cam Holmes and Dylan Coday.

Who are newcomers to the varsity squad who could make an impact? Sophomores Adan Diggs (transfer-Williams Field) and Trey McKinney (transfer-Las Vegas Bishop Gorman) and junior DJ Spencer (transfer-Desert Vista) and senior Gabe Coronado (transfer-Tucson Catalina Foothills).

What needs to happen for your squad to reach the state tournament this season, or achieve the goals the team has set? Stick together, be selfless and block outside noise.



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Lecture

• From page 17

news photographer in Phoenix and the first woman allowed to film inside the Phoenix Suns locker room. Organizers described her as a trailblazer whose work expanded opportunities for future generations of journalists.

The Heritage Lecture Series aims to document stories like Emmert's, accounts that capture Arizona's liv-

ing history from those who witnessed it firsthand.

"It was a great career," Emmert said as the program concluded. "I felt lucky every day. We had a helicopter, a camera and the freedom to go wherever the story took us. I wouldn't trade those years for anything."

The next lecture will take place Thursday, Jan. 18 and will cover the development of Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. Visit pwlhc.org for more information.

OPINION

Camelback Road trucks will endanger students

By Juliane Davis

With the new Hill Top School for the Arts opening up in Litchfield Park next fall, what is being done to stop all the dangerous trucks traveling along Camelback Road? It is only a matter of time before a student, or students, are killed by one of these 40,000-pound trucks. Why are these 10-20 ton rock trucks even allowed travel only feet from the new school? Why aren't they using Northern Parkway which are taxes paid for away from the school?

A tragedy will happen. Students will be killed by one of these trucks.

Hundreds if not thousands of these trucks are taking a shortcut from their plants through Litchfield and Goodyear. It's extremely sad that a tragedy has to happen before the council members wake up and do something about it.

File a lawsuit, file an injunction, do something, please. Expanding Camelback in two years is not a solution, that will only allow more trucks.

Litchfield Park is a charter city, that was the whole point of becoming one. Residents voted overwhelmingly to become one for this sole purpose. Stop these gravel, cement and rock trucks before students are killed.

As soon as the Senate bill was passed

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AzOpinions@iniusa.org.

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three years ago, the city council should have filed a lawsuit against the Arizona Sand and Gravel Association and the Arizona Truckers Association the very next day. Even if the city loses, at least tried. Don't just roll over.

How do you expect children from Litchfield Elementary School to ride their bikes after school to the new library with all these trucks? The library and new high school should have never broken ground until these trucks were solved. Terrible leadership decision. Do you honestly believe a young student from Litchfield Elementary after school riding their bike to the new library will not be killed crossing the road with hundreds of trucks?

Have you been out to the crossroads of Camelback Road and Litchfield Road at 7 a.m. and seen for yourself, when students will be arriving at the new high school, the sheer amount of trucks? There are hundreds and hundreds, it is a tragedy in the making.

Your Opinion

Our opinions page is to provide an open forum for our readers. We hope to stimulate debate, not to dominate or control it. We reserve the right to edit our opinions, and we insist on civility. Please include your name and phone number, so we can contact you for clarification or confirmation. We welcome your photo. All opinions must be no more than 300 words.

Those that are judged as personal attacks or complaints about neighbors, businesses or other opinion writers will not be considered. No person may submit more than two opinions for publication during a calendar month.

Two submissions in the same issue will not be published. The content of a submission is the responsibility of the person who submitted it.

FROM THE COVER

Lights

• From page 1

son, reflecting on the season's atmosphere. "These events really capture what our residents value."

A Citywide Tradition: The Holiday Lights Tour

One of Litchfield Park's most anticipated annual traditions is the Holiday Lights Tour, a self-guided map that highlights the most elaborately decorated homes in the community. Residents register their homes throughout the season, and the city updates the map regularly so families can take nighttime drives to explore the latest additions.

Participants compete in categories that highlight the creativity and personality of Litchfield Park's neighborhoods: Music & Tech, Creative Use of Lights, Crisp & Orderly Decorations, and Inflatables. Each category typically showcases about five or six standout

homes, and winners are selected by a rotating committee made up of residents and non-residents.

"Our residents do a fantastic job," Peterson said. "People look forward to it every year."

A New Spark: The Tree Lighting in Litchfield Square

The newest addition to the city's holiday lineup is the tree lighting ceremony in Litchfield Square Park. The event lights up the park with a large community tree, complemented by photos with Santa, carolers, sleigh rides, and hot chocolate, all the ingredients of a picture-perfect December evening, Peterson said.

Peterson said the ceremony grew naturally out of the city's expansion and its commitment to nurturing community life.

"Residents have been very supportive of new activities," she said. "We're growing, we're adding more, but we're still keeping those traditions that our

community knows and loves."

Another hallmark of the season is the city's annual hometown parade, which brings together more than 75 groups and thousands of participants. Its route now leads into Litchfield Square Park, connecting the parade directly with the city's Christmas in the Park festivities, shopping, Santa's workshop, a petting zoo, live music and activities for residents of all ages.

Also joining the lineup is a newly introduced Santa bike ride, which offers families a playful way to gather, dress festively, and support local giving initiatives.

"Giving is in our residents' nature," Peterson said. "It's part of what makes this community so special during the holidays."

The Signature Glow of Litchfield Park

If there's one visual that defines the season in Litchfield Park, it's the illuminated palms.

Roughly 70,000 lights spiral up the iconic rows of trees, and in a unique move, the City Council has chosen to keep them lit year-round, changing colors to match holidays and seasonal celebrations.

Peterson said the decision reflects the city's commitment to preserving a distinct sense of place, one that stands out even as the surrounding region grows rapidly.

"Our search for a small-town feel means keeping those traditions our residents know and love, while adding new events that represent growth but still maintain that small-town charm," she said. "That charm is important to the council, to staff, and to residents."

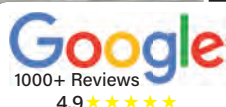
In Litchfield Park, that charm glows brightest in December. With beloved long-standing traditions, new community gatherings, and tens of thousands of lights strung across palms and rooftops, the city continues to shine, rooted in history, but unmistakably its own.

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FROM THE COVER



Yolanda Soto and Borderlands Produce Rescue feed families this holiday season. (Mary Goldmeer/Independent Newsmedia)

Produce

- From page 1

on Wheels Without Waste weekend events.

"I was very aware of the produce industry and how much product was actually being wasted," Soto said. Growing up in Ambos Nogales, a port where 60% of all winter produce consumed in the U.S. passes through, she saw firsthand how edible fruits and vegetables were routinely dumped despite being "completely healthy and edible."

At the distributor level, about 5% of produce goes unsold, often for reasons that have little to do with quality.

"It was impossible for me to sit back as I witnessed produce nurtured and grown to help sustain people instead be thrown out and actually harm the planet," Soto said.

Borderlands' model centers on three pillars: rescue, redistribute and recycle.

Since 1996, the group has saved 750 million pounds of produce, preventing an estimated 56 million pounds of methane from entering the atmosphere.

"We try very, very hard not to take any of it to landfills," Soto said. "We find a home for every single bit of produce, for people, for animals or for compost."

The organization operates four main programs, including Veggies R' Us for Santa Cruz County residents and Borderlands' Produce Travels, which sends rescued produce to agencies in more than 23 states, Potpourri for Animals and Composting and Produce on Wheels Without Waste. P.O.W.W.O.W., its largest Arizona initiative, uses 30 partner host sites to offer supporters up to 70 pounds of produce for a \$15 contribution.

Soto said the contribution is key to keeping the nonprofit, which does not take government funding, operational.

• See **Nutrition** on page 29

Nutrition

• From page 28

"We've learned that if you do not put value on a product, people don't value it, and those \$15 helps us keep things running. They go to gas for our trucks and repairs for our tractors," she said.

P.O.W.W.O.W. operates November through August, the peak season for produce flowing through the Nogales port of entry.

Each Saturday, volunteers gather before dawn to sort hundreds of boxes, helping Borderlands move the rescued produce quickly enough to save space for incoming donations.

"Our programs are all volunteer-based. We have a very small staff," Soto said. "We couldn't do it without volunteers. They're wonderful, wonderful people, wonderful helpers. They make it all possible"

Some sites operate drive-thru style,

others like farmers market walk-ups. A limited partnership with DoorDash provides smaller 25-pound boxes to residents unable to travel.

For Soto, the decision to deliberately offer more produce than most families can use is intentional.

"Not everyone is going to know about us, but the more people we can help, the better it is for our communities and mother earth," she said.

Borderlands traces its origins to 1992, when the Mariposa Community Health Center explored starting a food bank to serve Santa Cruz County. After initial support from Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona and FEMA, Borderlands became an independent nonprofit in 1996, with Soto appointed executive director.

Today, the organization leases a 13,000-square-foot Nogales warehouse with two cold rooms. Over decades, it has educated more than 4,000 industry donors about alterna-

tives to dumping edible produce.

"Each individual participating in our programs is doing their part to help curb food waste and create a cleaner planet," Soto said.

The holiday season often sees an increase in donations of time, money and service, but Borderlands is a program that demands year-round support from its team.

"In this country, we hone in on holidays and emergencies," Soto said. "People think, 'Oh, it's Thanksgiving, let's help,' or 'It's Christmas, let's help.' But people don't only eat on holidays."

Soto says the giving season still brings perspective.

"I'm thankful that I'm still around, I'm 76 years old and I can still do what I'm doing," she said. "I'm thankful that people are realizing what it's all about, and they're paying it forward and helping each other."

She hopes that spirit continues long after the holiday season fades.

"People need help all of the time," she said. "Every single moment of the day, you can look out there and see someone who needs help."

Borderlands will host P.O.W.W.O.W. markets throughout December.

In the Southwest Valley, it will be held Dec. 27 at the Odyssey Institute for Advanced and International Studies, 1495 S Verrado Way, in Buckeye. The site will offer drive-thru service, limited box reservations, and DoorDash delivery options.

For Soto, every box handed out represents more than produce rescued, it's a piece of a larger effort to shift the culture around waste.

"Education is very important," she said. "We feel that everyone has the obligation to help our planet, and we definitely need to live on a healthy one."

Visit borderlandsproducerescue.org for more information.



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