

Community

Cave Creek readies for potential water rate increase, sale of Desert Hills system; **6**

CAVE CREEK/CAREFREE INDEPENDENT

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Arts

Arizona Gold Mining Experience demonstration; **16**

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Turning lifelong trauma into advocacy

Cave Creek woman uses podcast to find mother's killer

By Maya McFall
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Nikki Wasilishin's life changed forever when her mother was murdered more than 32 years ago.

Now the Cave Creek resident, a Cactus Shadows high school graduate who teaches Pre-K at Quality Interactive Preschool and Montessori, 33212 North 56th St., has a podcast and social media account that delved into her mother's death to find who killed her.

Nikki isn't alone in the search. She now has more than 221,000 followers on TikTok, and her podcast, "Papi Killed Mommy," has been downloaded 240,000 times. It was in the top 20 podcast charts for true crime, and has been played in more than 106 countries, and 6,000 cities worldwide.

"Papi Killed Mommy," with 23 episodes, has a 4.8 star rating with 190



Nikki Wasilishin and her mother, Stephanie Wasilishin on her 32nd birthday

• See **Trauma** on page 4

Residents dispute Cave Creek's approval of easement to continue Glory Road

By Jeff Wendt
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Cave Creek residents who live near the area of 36th Street and Glory Road asked the Town Council during its Dec. 19 meeting to rescind a resolution adopted in October to seek an easement through a property to allow access to the neighborhood.

The owner of the house at 36th Street and Glory Road had a vehicle in the area in question that was causing the road to be blocked, which caused the town to draw up a resolution to make a road permanent and paved through the area.

During the call to public portion of the meeting, 10 neighborhood residents stood in front of the council and explained why the resolution should be rescinded.

"We have gathered a petition, and I would like to just simply read it such that everybody is on the same page," resident Michael Wehner

• See **Easement** on page 3

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FROM THE COVER



Cave Creek resident Martha Lefebvre, center, addresses the Cave Creek Town Council during the Call to the Public about rescinding a resolution the council adopted in October to make an easement for Glory Road between 32nd and 38th Streets. (Screen capture from YouTube)

Easement

• From page 1

said. “We the undersigned residents of Cave Creek request that resolution 2025-25 be rescinded and revert to status quo.”

“There is a misinterpretation in that resolution where the petition that is being referred to, at least from what we understand and we’ve read the petition, referred only to the unblockage existing at 36th Street, not access from Glory Road all the way to 32nd,” Wehner added. “OK. The owner of 3600 Glory Road has agreed to remove any blockage allowing emergency access through that section of Glory Road. If this is satisfactory to all concerned, the issue is resolved without any action. If it is not, then further options can be investigated without the significant implications of Resolution 2025-25.”

Resident Martha Lefebvre agreed the patent is unnecessary.

“Granting a patent easement creates long-term legal safety, maintenance, and enforcement liabilities for the town,” Lefebvre said. “A formal roadway would invite uncontrolled public access by hikers, cyclists, cars, ATVs, motorbikes, scooters, and other recreational users, raising safety

and enforcement concerns. Increased access would lead to desert erosion and environmental degradation with impacts that are costly and difficult to reverse.”

Resident Sherry Bertagnolli shared her views on the topic.

“I bought out there in order to have peace and quiet, and my grandkids are there all the time,” Bertagnolli said. “People, even though you say it’s 25 miles an hour, they do 40 down the road. I mean, there’s no stopping them. We’re going to run out there and tell them to do the speed limit, which no one will. The dust, the dirt, the view is gone,”

Melissa McCraig, the owner of the property in question, explained to the council her situation.

“There is a car there,” McCraig said. “I have been more than willing to move the car, but I want it as an emergency exit only. It’s not like they have gone through there or whatever. I’ve never stopped a walker. I’ve never stopped a horse. I’ve never stopped people on bikes. I’ve never stopped anybody to going through there and using that as a pathway or whatever.”

“So, there’s a way to get through there. It’s fine. I can move the car. And if there were to be a fire or some-

• See **Glory Road** on page 6



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FROM THE COVER

Trauma

• From page 1

reviews.

“The response has been overwhelming, to be honest with you. I didn’t expect it to get this big,” Nikki said.

But there are still questions to answer that Nikki has sought since she was 10 years old. The weight of that single night in Sedona has followed her, remaining in the background of her life.

Nikki remembers giving her mother a kiss, seeing her talk on the phone, and then going to bed.

“The next thing I know, the police are waking me up, there’s a flashlight in my face, and they’re telling me to get up and get dressed,” Nikki said.

An unexplained death

Stephanie Wasilishin was shot in her Sedona home on Coffee Pot Drive on July 9, 1993. Who did it remains unsolved.

Sedona Police discovered her body in the bedroom of the home she shared with her boyfriend, Russell Peterson, according to the 1993 case file.

When questioned by police, Peterson claimed he came home from work at 11 p.m., took a shower, then sat on the couch and talked with Stephanie. Peterson then said the conversation became “a little confrontational” when discussing his upcoming two-week trip to culinary school at Cornell University.

“We’re talking, we’re talking. It becomes a little heated, but nothing that a relationship hasn’t had happen in the past,” Peterson told police. “So, I didn’t think anything of it.”

Then, Peterson said Stephanie got up, went to the bedroom, and came back with his Ruger Redhawk .44 magnum. She allegedly fired the gun once and shot the wall beyond Peterson.

Stephanie then returned to the bedroom, and Peterson said he followed her. When he met her in the bedroom, Peterson told police, “I grabbed her

hand. And we struggled a little bit, and the next thing I know it went off and she dropped.”

When Sedona Police questioned how long the struggle lasted, Peterson replied, “It couldn’t have been more than 15 seconds, 20 seconds.”

Changing stories

In the days following, Sedona Police interviewed Peterson multiple times. When asked a day later to repeat what occurred after Stephanie went into the bedroom, Peterson changed his story, according to the police report and recordings of the interview.

“I think she committed suicide,” Peterson said. “I might be contradicting the fact, but I might have saw her shoot herself.”

Peterson then agreed to undergo hypnosis and a polygraph test while repeating that he “might have” seen Stephanie commit suicide.

The last time Sedona Police interviewed Peterson was Sept 9, 1993. This time, Peterson told police he did not remember what happened in the bedroom on the night of Stephanie’s death.

“I don’t think there was a struggle. The struggle was my own struggle,” Peterson said. “I never, I don’t think I ever, put my hands on her.”

When lead Detective William Spokes questioned why he believed there was no struggle, Peterson replied it was because he saw Stephanie fall from a distance, according to the interview tapes.

Stephanie’s death was ruled a homicide by Maricopa County Medical Examiner Philip Keene. According to the autopsy report, Keene’s reason for the homicide ruling was due to gun powder residue on Stephanie’s non-dominant left hand, suggesting a defensive posture at the time of her death.

No suspect was ever charged with Stephanie’s murder.

The Cave Creek Independent was not able to reach Peterson for comment.



“Papi Killed Mommy” is a true crime podcast created by Nikki Wasilishin delving into her mother’s cold case.

Telling the story

Nikki said she remembers climbing into the back of a police car with her 3-year-old half-sister Kristina Miller.

“Papi killed mommy,” Kristina said repeatedly to Nikki, and to police, according to the case file.

“I’ll remember that all my life,” Nikki, 32 years later, reflects.

For many years, Nikki lived with the unanswered question: Who killed her mother? But through much it, she thought there was little she could do. That changed in 2020 when Kristina called Nikki and said their mother’s cold case was being re-investigated.

Hopeful, Nikki awaited a call from Sedona Police. After five months of silence, she decided to take matters into her own hands.

Nikki requested her mother’s case file from Sedona Police, and nine months later, she finally decided to read it.

Unsure of where to start, she took the advice of an old friend she used to waitress with, Sarah Turney, and started a TikTok @nicolewasilishin.

Turney herself had created a podcast “Voices for Justice,” and a TikTok account in 2020 that talked about her sister’s 2001 disappearance.

The podcast led to the arrest of her father, Michael Turney, in August 2020. He was charged with second-degree murder of her sister, Alissa. All charges

were dismissed when the court did not find enough substantial evidence for a conviction.

Following Turney’s advice, Nikki created a podcast in July 2025, on the anniversary of her mother’s death.

In the podcast “Papi Killed Mommy,” Nikki goes through the case and reveals interviews with Peterson, the 911 call made that night, and conducts interviews with her family members.

Nikki never imagined how much support she would gain from her listeners.

Finding a community

Nikki went to Crime Con, an event for true crime podcasters and fans. She was able to share her story there and was surprised to meet her supporters face to face.

“They’re just as mad as I am, which is overwhelming, you know, to have strangers care just as much as you do,” Nikki said.

Although she has had success with her podcast, chasing justice for her mother has been exhausting, Nikki said.

“When I finished the podcast, I thought that I would be relieved, excited. It was everything that I didn’t think I was gonna feel. I felt like she died again. I couldn’t believe it was over,” said Nikki.

However, Nikki is determined to keep sharing her mother’s story.

“Anybody out there listening to the podcast could be the key to justice, so I’ll keep talking, you know, even if one person listens or a million,” she said.

Although season one of Nikki’s podcast is over, she is planning season two, which will explore true crime stories similar to her own.

“It’s not just a mission for my mom anymore,” she said. “It’s gonna be a lifelong obsession to figure out what the breakdown is with domestic violence in Arizona.”

Her message to victims’ family members is this: “You are your loved one’s own best advocate.”



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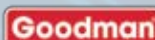
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Cave Creek readies for potential water rate increase, sale of Desert Hills system

By Jeff Wendt

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The town of Cave Creek posted notices Wednesday of a public hearing to discuss proposed utility rate change to water customers in Cave Creek as well as a request for bids in its effort to sell the Desert Hills Water system.

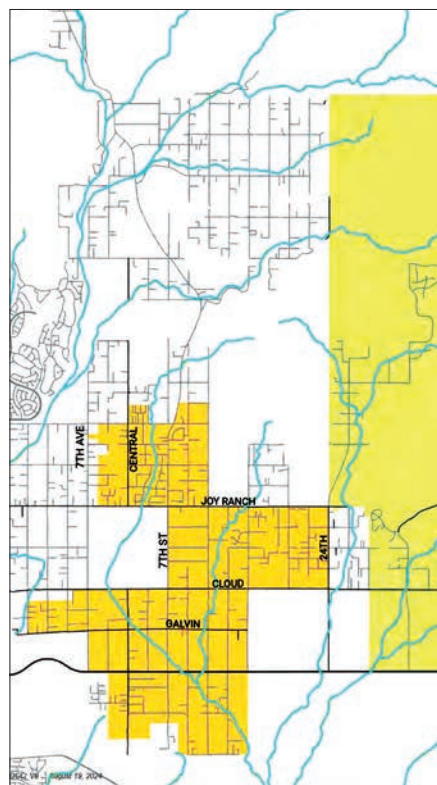
The council will hear comments from the public at its council meeting on Jan. 6, 2026, before voting on a proposed 6% increase in revenue and a change to the rate structure for Cave Creek Water, Cave Creek Wastewater and Desert Hills Water.

Should council approve the changes, the rate structure would take effect on Feb. 5, 2026.

The proposed changes were discussed during a town council work session Oct. 15. Feedback from council during the work session gave the town's finance department time to change some scenarios, and the new proposed rate changes were presented to the town's Utilities Advisory Committee on Oct. 29.

The new rate structures were approved by council in the Nov. 4 meeting and to set a public hearing. A water use tier for customers using less than 4,000 gallons per month was created with the lowest rate. Customers using more than 40,000 gallons per month will pay the highest rates. The average water use in Cave Creek and Desert Hills is approximately 11,000 gallons per month.

For example, current Cave Creek Water users up to 10,000 gallons per month were paying a rate of \$3.09 per 1,000 gallons. The new rate would be split into two tiers: Those under 4,000 gallons would pay \$2.80



The Town of Cave Creek is requesting bids to sell off the Desert Hills Water system, seen at the bottom left of the map. (Courtesy of the Town of Cave Creek)

per 1,000 gallons, and between 4,000 and 10,000 would pay \$3.50 per 1,000 gallons. Their base charge, depending on the size of line coming into their property, would go from the current rate of between \$61.69 and \$311.16 to \$65.04 and \$362.37 per month.

For Desert Hills Water users, some will see a decrease, while others would see a slight increase in rates. Those in the lower tier of 0-4,000 gallons will see a decrease from \$5.24 to \$4.40 per 1,000 gallons, while those from 4,000-10,000 will see a slight increase to \$5.94 per 1,000 gallons. The base charge, currently between \$76.61 and

\$419.35, would go up to between \$80.76 and \$432.31 per month.

Town staff will also be promoting water conservation efforts for customers to reduce their monthly rates.

The town is also looking to receive bids on a potential sale of the Desert Hills Water system.

Town officials have concluded it should issue the request for bids to determine if an alternative public or private sector enterprise would be better suited to address the long-term needs of the Desert Hills' customers.

The town is seeking to sell to a single qualified and experienced company that will take over ownership, operations, maintenance, and management of the Desert Hills system.

The purchase will include all existing assets, including three currently operating groundwater wells, four active and one inactive water storage tank, four pumping stations, water mains, water distribution systems and appurtenances.

An optional pre-bid meeting will be held at 10:30 a.m. Dec. 16 with a site visit to follow. Questions from bidders must be submitted by Jan. 5, 2026 with final bids due on Jan. 15, 2026.

The Desert Hills Water System began operations in 1970 by primarily providing hauled water services. Over the years, a distribution system was constructed to allow the direct delivery of water to customers. The town of Cave Creek acquired both the private Desert Hills and Cave Creek water companies in 2007. Both water systems were integrated into the town's municipal operations.

Glory Road

• From page 3

thing like that, yes, I'm not that much of a jerk that I would not let someone come through there in the intent of that."

McCraig continued by saying she felt the same way as the other residents that the resolution is not needed.

"But for everyday traffic coming going down through there, first of all, you're not going to get a truck and trailer down there because of the wash," McCraig said. "The wash is very, very deep and the way it is it goes down and up. You would jack knife. I know because I did it. So I would prefer that I would be more than happy if there's an emergency."

"So, I disagree with this and I'd like the resolution to be that yes, I'll move the car," McCraig added. "If there's an emergency and someone needs to get through there, that's fine, great, terrific. But to open it up would be the dumbest move that we can make because it's going to devalue every one of our properties, every one."

Town Manager Grady Miller said during his report that something will get done soon.

"I really can't get into the discussion about the call to the public and the residents behind me that brought up their concerns tonight, but I will tell the council and the residents that the staff will address their concerns and bring back to council for its discussion and possible direction to staff," Miller said. "I anticipate it probably be the January 20th council meeting."

"So Hal (Hal Marron, Town Engineer) and I and Tyler Thurman will try to work with the residents on coming up with a resolution," Miller added. "I think I've heard one already. So we will meet with them and try to get this resolved before we bring it back to the council."

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Mid Month Pricing Update and Forecast

By Janet Mohr
MOHR GROUP

Each month about this time we look back at the previous month, analyze how pricing has behaved and report on how well our forecasting techniques performed. We also give a forecast for how pricing will move over the next month.

For the monthly period ending December 15, we are currently recording a sales \$/SF of \$307 averaged for all areas and types across the ARM-LS database. This is up a startling 4.3% from the \$294.28 we measured for November 15. Our forecast range mid-point was \$300.49. Pricing has been far stronger than we anticipated, with the actual result 50 cents above the upper limit of our 90% confidence band. The monthly median

price has also jumped unexpectedly from \$450,000 to \$459,990 and the monthly average sales price has risen a shocking 7.3% to \$633,494. Quite impressive for a single month, though not good if you are a buyer.

On December 15, the pending listings for all areas and types show an average list \$/SF of \$332.40, up another 2.4% from the reading for November 15. This suggests that closed prices are likely to rise again over the next 4 weeks. Among those pending listings we have 97.2% normal, 1.2% in REOs and 1.5% in pre-foreclosures (including a very small number of short sales). The level of distress is up from last month, and higher than it has been since 2019, but remains at a low level compared to the average of the last 25 years.

Our mid-point forecast for the average monthly sales \$/SF on January 15 is \$307.35, which is up 0.1% from the December 15 reading. We have a 90% confidence that it will fall within $\pm 2\%$ of this mid point, i.e. in the range \$301.20 to \$313.50.

Demand has responded to lower and more stable interest rates (averaging around 6.3% for a 30-year fixed) by giving us higher pending and UCB counts than last year (up 6.4%). In addition we are seeing more closings per month than this time last year (up 4.2%). Meanwhile supply has been falling quickly over the last 4 weeks and we now have only 13.5% more supply than last year, a much lower gap than last month. The overall market balance still favors buyers, but the count of



the areas with a buyer's market is falling while several of the larger markets are moving into balance or a seller's market.

Statistical Market Analysis

Status	# Listings	List Volume	Sold Volume		List Price	Sold Price	Sale/List Price	Approx SQFT	List Price Per Approx SQFT	Sold Price Per Approx SQFT	Agent Days on Market	Cumulative Days on Market
Closed	11	9,424,803	9,072,500	Low	530,000	500,000	0.93	1,674	264.82	246.68	3	3
				Avg	856,800	824,773	0.96	2,438	350.51	337.93	61	61
				High	1,622,903	1,575,000	0.99	4,019	538.13	527.31	150	150
Overall	11	9,424,803	9,072,500	Low	530,000	500,000	0.93	1,674	264.82	246.68	3	3
				Avg	856,800	824,773	0.96	2,438	350.51	337.93	61	61
				High	1,622,903	1,575,000	0.99	4,019	538.13	527.31	150	150

Selection Criteria for Comparable Properties

Specified listings from the following search: Property type Residential; Close of Escrow Date relative 7 days back; Status of 'Closed'; Zip Code of '85331', '85377'.

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OPINION

Hello, 2026: Resolutions, Revelations, Revolution

By Jim White & Don Senneville

January is to coffee like a sweater is to a fireplace. All are necessary for that cozy winter feeling that has descended on our local Coffee Row.

Fireplaces abound at Local Jonny's, also in the lobby of the Seed Cafe, and of course outdoors under the Carefree Sundial — all glow with the warmth of desert winter. Sometimes it goes below 50 degrees! Remember last summer? We don't either. Therefore, coffee becomes a survival tool for our "wicked" winters.

As our temperatures drop, the frequency of caffeine seekers increases as do the Snowbirds (who don't seem to notice the temperature). We locals put away our shorts and sandals for the winter two months ago. Now it's down vests and warm socks.

We all love to celebrate the success of small business owners who, through hard work, creative vision, and loyal employees become global. Think Starbucks in a garage in Seattle, or ROC2 Coffee on the hill in Cave Creek, and Mr. and Mrs. Claus busy in their little workshop heated by a welcoming wood stove at the North Pole. What a vision they had! Santa is the ultimate entrepreneur. Now Santa, Inc. has the largest global network on the planet. Move over Elon and Jeff and Bill and Mark. The highly paid Elves and the loyal-grass-fed-humanely-treated reindeer always deliver.

This is capitalism at its finest: fun, lucrative, and shared freely sometimes with all. Merry Christmas in 2026 from Santa, Inc. and Subsidiaries. We have progressed from just one guy guiding a bunch of animals

pulling a flying sled full of chimney-sized presents, to becoming now a world where we can order a pair of Christmas socks and have them at the front door by dawn! Thank you Santa for creating this amazing global evolution of Christmas Capitalism. Truly the magic of the holidays. Thanks Jeff and your Amazon elves. The 4-year-old granddaughter thinks the drivers really are elves. They even have a union.

However, we at The CUP prefer to celebrate the successes of our own Coffee Row establishments. Our mission has been, and still is: To discover and enjoy local coffee within the view of Black Mountain. Each family owned and operated coffee shop radiates its own unique personality and vibe into our two towns. Very special.

We love our coffee shops. Think of all that we have written about this last year. Looking back over 2025, we have been rewarded by our readers who now welcome us as we report on the state of our coffee. The CUP has been to the Carefree Roastery, Starbucks inside Bashas', the Black Mountain Coffee Shop, Big Earl's, Local Jonny's, Janey's, Raven's View, the Grotto, Wagon Wheel, Brunch, Bull and Brew, Divine Bakery, Seed at Cirvana, Little Snitch, Heart and Soul Cafe, Pinnacle Peak General Store, Press Coffee at Sprouts, Rocky Point, Bartlett Lake, Sedona, Pinetop, San Francisco, and finally, back to the



Village Coffee Shop and Creperie. In all of these, with a few exceptions, Don has stuck with his americanos with oat milk. One of us is still wondering how you get milk from oats. The Village Coffee Shop and Creperie has become our base camp, primarily because of their lem-

on bars, friendly baristas, Marina, and Audrey Hepburn portraits. We see many of the same Creekers and Carefreers in our local coffee shops on a regular basis — same time, same spot, same coffee. We will report more about their behavior.

History has shown us that coffee shops have been the seedbed for civil discussion and the exchange of creative ideas. 2026 promises to see an even greater need for the clarity of caffeine and conversation. Caffeine-fueled revelations led to revolutionary resolutions in subversive coffee houses that seeded the roots of resistance. Tea was out, but not down. We will keep an eye on the English Rose Tea Room in Carefree in light of the historical precedents described below.

From the Green Dragon Tavern in Boston to the Smyrna Coffee House in London, coffee was seen as a patriotic drink in the colonies after the Boston Tea Party, when drinking tea fell out of fashion. At the time, American taverns served coffee alongside liquor, and the Green Dragon Tavern in Boston was nicknamed the "Headquarters of the Revolution" by Daniel Webster for housing many meetings of the Sons



Local Jonny's is a popular location among Cave Creek and Carefree residents. (Courtesy of Jim White)

of Liberty, leading up to and during the Revolutionary War. Over in New York, Merchants Coffee House was known for its gatherings of patriots eager to break free from George III. In the 1780s, it became the site where merchants organized to create both the Bank of New York and to reorganize the New York Chamber of Commerce. Benjamin Franklin wrote his "Open Letter to Lord North" satirizing the king's power over the colonies from the Smyrna Coffee House in London. (History Channel, 2020)

So on those notes we are beginning our fourth year of The CUP. Thanks to all our readers, former students, fellow coffee nuts and grandchildren for all the laughs and good times in 2025. We will continue to cover local coffee news in 2026 on Coffee Row, in the shadow of Black Mountain.

Write to Don and Jim at The CUP at AZNews@iniusa.org.

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New Year health resolutions. This time let's talk about what we shouldn't do instead.

Every year, many people set resolutions for better health. Then, in most cases, by February, the excitement of those resolutions has faded. It seems like the harder you are on yourself, the less chance the resolutions will stick. In the past 30 years of practice, I rarely see patients follow through on their health goals for the year. This is a major reason I've written articles in July suggesting rekindling those resolutions once again. Routinely, the resolutions are filled with things to do, instead of things not to do. I find that it's easier to make a list of things we shouldn't do to stay healthy instead. Let's discuss some of these now.

Fast weight loss programs that involve injections.

Here we are approaching the new year. Most people set their main health goal as weight loss. Lately, the popular weight loss method is the injection of GLP-1. This was designed to be used by diabetics with difficulty losing weight. It was intended to be used for the rest of their life. At this time, most patients are on it for a short time, lose their weight, and then gain the weight back. This is very unhealthy. You do not need to be a doctor to figure this out. There is no quick fix for weight loss, or any health issue. The work has to be done, that's all. I will suggest the next time you are offered a drug, ask yourself, or the pharmacist, what is the mechanism behind it, and what else in the body needs to happen for the drug to work? This is how things lead to dangerous effects. Side effects just don't "happen." They occur as a result of the other pathways

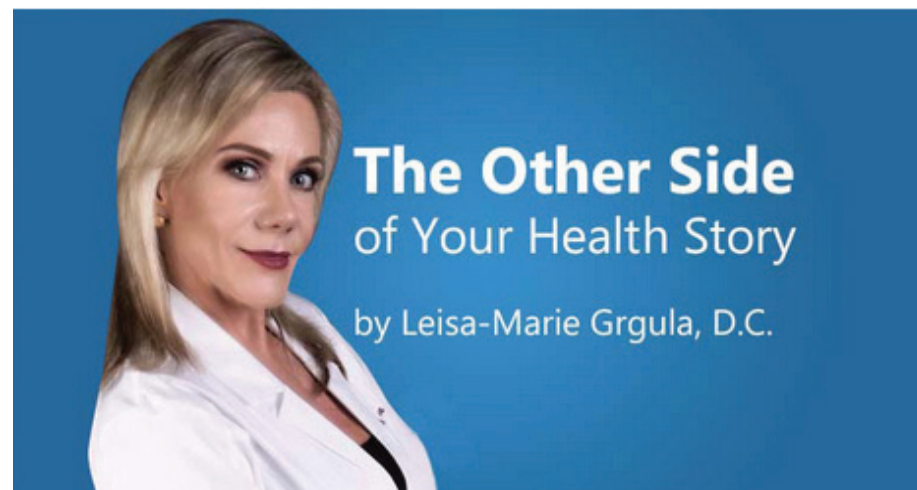
that are affected by the drug. This is the reason I want you to understand that this is not a choice you should make for weight loss. In my office, I do not allow GLP-1 drugs. We offer, however, a drug free weight loss program that allows you to eat your own food, while losing weight, and keeping it off.

Opting for surgery or injections for knee pain.

I've written articles you can see on my website about the damage to cartilage from steroid and hyaluronic acid injections. The research is there, and I feel passionate as to why a physician would continue to inject a patient's joint with either drug, knowing they are causing more damage in the long run. I do realize that most insurances cover these procedures, but that does not make it an appropriate treatment that is in your best interest. Regenerative therapies including stem cells, exosomes, ozone and PRP are designed to signal the body to regenerate the tissue that has been damaged due to age or injury. Do not have treatments that may ruin your joints by causing further damage.

Having ablation for spinal nerves, or even spinal surgery as the first option.

Most doctors will tell the patient that ablations may only last about 6 months, if they even relieve nerve pain at all. A number of things can go wrong when you burn a nerve, and the consequences are high. Many patients who come to me have had ablations, and are still in pain. Spinal surgery may fail up to 76%. This



is quite a high number, and I understand that the patients who have found this to be true in my 30 years of practice. Receiving alternative spinal treatment that is scientifically proven, including specific protocols that work together, like Cox Technic, acupuncture, and electrical stimulation help reduce pain. I have helped thousands of patients to get their life back without drugs or surgery, and even those who have had failed surgery. Please visit my website for testimonial videos on all of the above.

Increase exercise.

This is probably number one of all. Most patients tell me they want to increase their exercise in the new year. I caution them to increase slowly, and to try not to go back to the level they were at years ago or even 1 year ago. This is how injuries happen. We all want to get back to our old exercise routine when we felt and looked better, but it's a process. Yes, you can increase your exercise, but please know that you can do the same exercise routine with more in-

tensity and concentration. This will give you better results with a much less chance of injury. Joining a more expensive gym, increasing exercise classes, or taking longer hikes or bike rides may not be necessary. Please take the time to perfect the exercise you are doing, and it may save you time, money and possible injuries.

If you, or anyone you know may be interested in any of the treatments I mentioned above, please call my office to schedule a complimentary consultation to see if you qualify for treatments that keep you in the game of life without stressful downtime, and keeping your new year resolutions!

DrLeisa@CaringPainRelief.com or call my office.

*Leisa-Marie Grgula, DC
Chiropractic Physician
Accurate Care Medical Wellness Center
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(480) 584-3955*

MAYOR'S DESK

Carefree: A Year in Review

By John Crane
CAREFREE MAYOR

As another year draws to a close, it is an appropriate time to reflect on the past twelve months. In both our personal lives and in local government, year's end reviews provide an opportunity to pause, assess progress, and acknowledge accomplishments. The Town of Carefree is no exception. The past year has been both active and productive.

Public safety remained a primary focus. The installation of blinking stop signs and digital speed display signs enhanced driver awareness and improved compliance with traffic regulations. These measures were supported by increased enforcement efforts from the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) to address unsafe driving behavior.

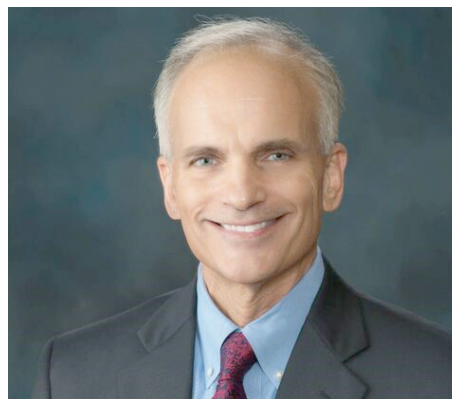
Building on the 2024 acquisition of a new fire engine and brush truck, the Town continued to replace end of useful life emergency equipment. Ensuring that first responders are properly equipped continues to be a fundamental focus. Additionally, through a collaborative effort involving the Town, the Carefree Fire Department, and residents, three neighborhoods achieved Firewise certification. This proactive initiative reduces wildfire risk and strengthens overall community preparedness.

Community engagement continued to be a key priority throughout the year. Programs and events included

Coffee with a Cop, Firewise introduction sessions, Caffeine with a Firefighter, Carefree Garden Seminars, Carefree Under the Stars, Carefree Conversations, Merchant Meetings, and a Fall Prevention Workshop. These initiatives fostered meaningful connections among residents, local businesses, and Town staff.

As Carefree's infrastructure continues to age, proactive maintenance has become increasingly important. Some of the Town's streets have been in service for more than 60 years. To address this, Carefree implemented a comprehensive street maintenance program designed to extend the lifespan of public roadways. In two older neighborhoods, asphalt rehabilitation was completed by milling the top two inches of pavement and replacing it with a new surface. To better maintain soft shoulders along the Town's 110 miles of roadways, Carefree also invested in a new dump truck and a water tanker truck. These additions improved operational efficiency and enhanced the Town's ability to respond effectively to storm-related cleanup efforts.

The Town also prioritized improvements in operational efficiency and accessibility for residents and contractors. Digital permitting was implemented to streamline the processing of hundreds of permit and license applications each year. This system allows applications to be submitted and tracked online while increasing transparency by enabling



Mayor John Crane

residents to monitor contractor performance, thereby improving accountability and customer service.

While 2025 was a strong year, the future presents both opportunities and challenges. These include economic development initiatives within the Town Core and at the northeast corner of Carefree Highway and Cave Creek Road, fire and emergency service contract negotiations, the appointment of a new Town Administrator, updates to the Town's zoning code, a potential reduction in Central Arizona Project water allocations, continued residential street maintenance, and expanded community engagement through the addition of an Aging with Dignity Educational Series.

Carefree is a unique and exceptional community. While considerable progress has been made, important work lies ahead.

More online

A full version on this Speak Up column is on the Daily Independent at YourValley.net. Email AZOpinions@iniusa.org.

Speak Up

"I am not in favor of naming a portion of the freeway in the name of Charlie Kirk. There are so many people or organizations that work so hard to support the community and represent a larger group that deserve recognition without the political connotations." — Wendy Gibbs via email

"Charlie Kirk's death was tragic yes. However, Charlie Kirk was not an elected official, he was a podcaster. Renaming a highway that's already named after an actual elected official is just wrong. Ed Pastor, our state's first Hispanic representative in Congress, did more for Arizona than Kirk could ever dream of doing for Arizona." — George D. Rascón via email



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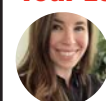
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MAYOR'S DESK

There is a lot to celebrate in 2026

By Robert Morris
CAVE CREEK MAYOR

Cave Creek had much to celebrate in 2025. We welcomed the Turquoise Circuit Rodeo Finals, featuring top southwestern competitors vying for a spot at the national finals in Las Vegas. The 49th annual Cave Creek Rodeo Days, Harold's Cave Creek Corral's 90th anniversary, and the Cave Creek Museum's 55th year all marked major milestones. Many more organizations and events will be recognized, along with the Town's achievements, at the 2026 State of the Town address on Thursday, February 5, 2026, at 10 a.m. at the Desert Foothills Library.

There is so much more for Cave Creek residents to celebrate in 2026. As I hope you have heard, the Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area is holding its 25th Anniversary celebration on Friday, January 9, starting at 10 a.m. at the park's parking lot. This event, hosted by the Town and the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation, will be a time to celebrate the people who fought so hard to protect nearly 2,154 acres from development and preserve this beautiful part of the Sonoran Desert for generations to come.

We're not only celebrating Spur Cross, but also marking the 40th anniversary of Cave Creek's incorporation. Cave Creek was founded in 1870 and was governed by Maricopa County until 1986. That year, residents voted to incorporate, creating the official Town of



Mayor Robert Morris

Cave Creek with a Town Council and dedicated services. Enjoy fun activities and special events throughout 2026 to recognize this milestone.

This year's biggest celebration, of course, is our country's Semiquincentennial—better known as America's 250th Anniversary. I have no doubt we will come together as proud residents of both Cave Creek and America to mark this historic occasion.

Take the Civility Pledge

We appreciate your submissions to our Opinions pages. Email AZOpinions@iniusa.org to submit your thoughts on a subject.

We also want you to take our Civility Pledge. Read our Civility Guidelines and then take the pledge at yourvalley.net/civility-pledge/

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Open Space committee gives update on Cave Creek-area land purchases

By Jeff Wendt

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Open Space Ad Hoc Committee gave an almost two hour presentation Tuesday, Dec. 2 to the Cave Creek Town Council to provide an update on the possible purchase of 4,005 acres of state trust land near the town.

Committee Chairman Steve Lamar, along with members Stacy Daniel and Bill Basore, gave a detailed report of what the committee has accomplished so far.

The committee split into three groups: Communication and outreach, financing and stakeholders, and evaluation and prioritization.

"We understand that all of those (groups) have synergy with each other, and the success of one aspect obviously plays on the others," Lamar said. "But that was the way we broke up. We committed to have the working groups communicate and work in a small group on their area."

"And then once a month we'd meet together and then we'd all discuss what we'd done, an update internally, and then discuss and evaluate issues and kick things around so we were all on the same page," Lamar added.

The communication and outreach group came up with a logo and tagline for the open space project, discussed creating a website, creating marketing materials, social media outreach, creating a survey, holding special events and getting promotional merchandise with the logo of the project out in the community.

The financing and stakeholders group looked at the opportunities of identifying the mechanisms that



Open Space Ad Hoc Committee members, from left, Bill Basore, Stacy Daniel and Chairman Steve Lamar, give a presentation Dec. 2 to the Cave Creek Town Council on the progress the committee has made regarding purchase of open space land around Cave Creek. (Independent Newsmedia/Jeff Wendt)

could be available in purchasing the land, from the existing funding, to a possible secondary property tax through election, to private donations, to direct solicitation of funds, to even large donations and the selling of naming rights to parts of the open space.

The committee even examined working with governments and partnering with Maricopa County, which owns some of the land around Cave Creek.

When the Spur Cross purchase was completed, the town used a sunseting secondary property tax to finance that purchase.

Should the town use that same option going forward, it must get

voter approval from town residents. Any decision on that move must be announced 180 days prior to a primary election or general election. Then, 148 days prior to the general election, the ballot language must be completed and submitted and is the last day council can take the measure off the ballot.

The soon-to-be developed Halo Vista project near the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. is what is driving the committee to pursue the land purchase so that it can be preserved and housing developments cannot snatch up the property, officials say.

The third group, the evaluation and prioritization group, looked

to identify what parcels the town could partner with Maricopa County on, as well as if the whole acreage could not be purchased, prioritize which parcels of land would be of most importance in the committee's view.

The town must satisfy a minimum 160 acre purchase of land in an agreement made with the Arizona State Land Department. The town has set aside \$2.5 million for the land's purchase. According to a recent appraisal, the average cost of land in the area the committee is looking is approximately \$4,000 an acre. At that appraisal, the town could purchase approximately 625 acres of the 4,005 with the funds on hand.

The group also looked at the acquiring parcels over time, but more discussion within the group is needed to evaluate the best options.

"I've heard no one in town or on council who is even reluctant, and the kind of spectacular work that this committee has done is truly amazing," Mayor Robert Morris said. "I'm just blown away by the thoroughness, the rating system, the map, the focus on self-help, with donations, with outreach campaigns. It's the best work I've seen in the town."

Lamar said the committee believes it will wrap up its meetings within the next month or two, and will be ready to give the council a final report on its findings and the next steps the council should take.

"We're here to gather information," Lamar said. "We're here to have ideas, and the work of making hard decisions is going to be up to you."

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In 30 Minutes I Had a Plan for My Shoulder Pain that Didn't Require Surgery or Pills

**By Shoulder Pain Expert,
Dr. Matthew Hernandez**

ETHOS INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE

"I was losing sleep. I couldn't get comfortable at night and would wake up constantly. That was the most frustrating part. Everything I was told to do was not helping... the pain was only getting worse."

Tim, 46, came to us after exhausting every option outside of surgery. A competitive volleyball player, energetic entrepreneur, and father to two boys, Tim took pride in his active lifestyle and was determined to find a solution for his shoulder pain.

Ice packs and heat compresses were no longer helpful, and relying on pain-pills was not an option he wanted

to take. He committed to physical therapy for several weeks with little impact, tried dry needling and cortisone injections without success, and was ultimately told by multiple doctors to stop all activity that aggravated his arm. Tim had done everything his insurance allowed but was still stuck at square one.

WHAT THE OTHER DOCTORS MISSED...

Tim had fallen into what we call "The Gap" — where insurance-based care cycles with no end in sight, surgery isn't an option, and waiting for the pain to get worse seems like the only choice. Most providers only look for what they know how to treat. But our comprehensive 'Deep Dive' approach and expertise allowed us to bridge that gap for Tim.

Using a detailed pain profile, 32-point shoulder inspection, MSK ultrasound scan, and diagnostic injection, we were able to confirm Tim's SC Joint injury and quickly develop a targeted treatment plan to heal the damaged tissue.

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In just 4 weeks, the pain improved significantly, allowing Tim to regain his range of motion, sleep soundly at night, and return to the sport he loves:

"My body is performing better than before, and I have resumed playing volleyball — something I didn't think I would ever be able to do again! If you're tired of the 'just hope for the best' from many in the medical field, and want a complete set of options,

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THINGS TO DO

Arizona Gold Mining Experience demonstration planned at Cave Creek Museum

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Cave Creek Museum will host its popular Arizona Gold Mining Experience on Saturday, Jan. 10.

The interactive experience lets visitors see the operation of Arizona's only fully operational ten-stamp ore crushing mill, the Golden Reef Stamp Mill and Tramway. The 10, 1,000-lb. stamps slam in synchronized motion to pound ore removed from the mine and turn it into fine sand.

The stamp mill was brought from its former location at the Golden Reef Mine on Continental Mountain to Cave Creek Museum and now is located just five miles from its site on the mountain. Cave Creek Museum has the only fully operational mining stamp mill in its original mining district in Arizona. The giant stamp mill is connected to a working tramway and ore carts that carry the ore to be pulverized by the stamp mill. See a mine shaft that "explodes" with sights and sounds.

Among other activities, guests also will visit a blacksmith shop for a demonstration of the many skills used when parts and tools had to be fabricated onsite. Guests also are encouraged to try their luck at the gold panning station to learn how to pan for ore and minerals just like prospectors did.

This mining campus exhibit area is not ADA-compliant. The program is approximately one-hour and 15 minutes long and largely takes place in the outside exhibit area. Footing is uneven and slightly hilly in places.



Arizona's only fully operational ten-stamp ore crushing mill is located at the Cave Creek Museum. (Courtesy of Fran Booth)

For an even more fun and historic day, guests can sign up to visit the Gold Fever Rackensack Mine tour, a three-hour event that departs from the museum at 12:45 p.m. Gold Fever participants head out in a unique 10-passenger 4WD Jeep, which will travel into the Tonto National Forest and the patented Ft. Worth Gold Mine. The tour ascends them to the Mountain Chaparral vegetation zone with views up to a 4,500-foot elevation.

The Arizona Gold Mining Experience opens at 9 a.m. for check-in before the experience

begins at 10 a.m. Guests must reserve their tickets in advance as the experience is a very popular attraction and capacity is held to 45 persons. Admission is \$20 for children over age 13 and adults and seniors; children under 12 are free. The Gold Mine tour is \$145 per person.

Visit cavecreekmuseum.org to register for the experience and/or the mine tour or call 480-488-2764.

The Cave Creek Museum is located at 6140 E. Skyline Drive, and is open from October to May.



A child checks out an animal skin at a recent Wildlife Watchers event. (Courtesy of Fran Booth)

Kiwanis Family Fun Days presents Wildlife Watchers at Cave Creek Museum

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Cave Creek Museum, in conjunction with the Desert Awareness Committee, will present Wildlife Watchers on Jan. 17 from 10 a.m.-noon.

People can learn about desert predators and prey, their habitats and more, in this interactive adventure. Learn from Desert Awareness Committee and Southwest Wildlife Conservation Center experts as they guide you through desert creatures and learn and how they thrive and survive.

"How well do you know our desert wildlife?" said Carol Ann Anderson, education chair for Cave Creek Museum. "Where do they live? Who hunts (predators) and who hides (prey)? Are they carnivores, herbivores or omnivores? How can you tell? Can you

Kiwanis Preschool Pioneers present pair of books for January event

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Cave Creek Museum's Kiwanis Preschool Pioneers program will present two books for its January gathering.

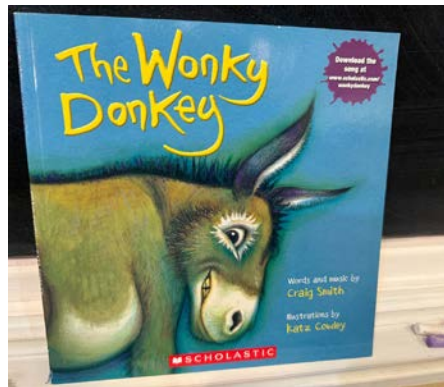
The Museum will present "The Wonky Donkey" and "Pedro's Pan" from 10-11 a.m. Thursday, Jan. 8.

"The Wonky Donkey" is a young children's beloved favorite. In "Pedro's Pan," Pedro and Pan — one in red plaid and suspenders, the other round and shiny with a mobile smile and eyes — explore together, braving wild animals, harsh weather, and hard work before striking gold.

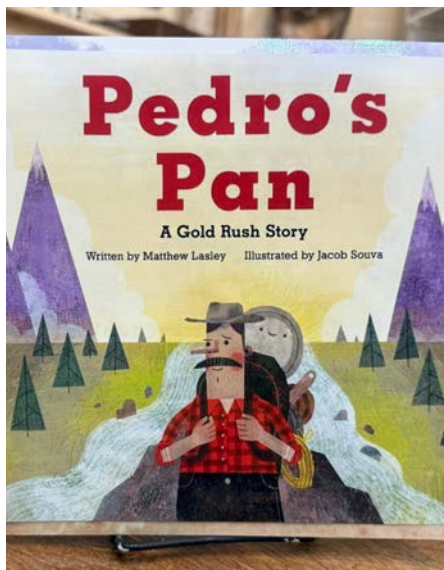
Children will see and pet a donkey as well as gold pan with the help of their parent or caregiver. Children even will make their own pan.

The Kiwanis Preschool Pioneers is a program for children and accompanying adult who will lead their little ones assisted by museum volunteers. Age-appropriate books set the stage for follow-up activities that include movement and music, trying a craft process, like grinding corn, exploring museum artifacts or acting out part of the story. Pre-registration is required at cavecreekmuseum.org.

The Cave Creek Museum is at 6140 E. Skyline Drive. Call 480-488-2764 for more information. The museum is open from October through May.



One of The Kiwanis Pioneers' books for the month is "The Wonky Donkey" by Craig Smith. (Courtesy of Fran Booth)



One of The Kiwanis Pioneers' books for the month is "Pedro's Pan" by Matthew Lasley. (Courtesy of Fran Booth)

Wildlife

• From page 16

spot them just by their tracks, or maybe by their... scat?"

Visit the museum website at cavecreekmuseum.org to register. This program is free due to the kind generosity of Kiwanis Club of Carefree.

The 55-year-old museum's mission is to preserve the artifacts of the prehistory, history, culture and legacy of the Cave Creek Mining District and the Cave Creek/Carefree foothills area through education, research, and interpretive exhibits. The museum is located at 6140 E. Skyline Drive. Call 480-488-2764 for more information. The museum is open from October through May.

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CLUES ACROSS

1. Lakes
6. Electromotive force
9. Invests in little enterprises
13. Longtime Utah Jazz coach
14. Small sailboat
15. Actor Idris
16. Mild yellow Dutch cheese made in balls
17. System that detects objects under water
18. Harsh, grating noise
19. Steward
21. A fencing sword
22. Infections
23. Actress Ryan
24. Sodium
25. Swedish castle
28. A lump of slime
29. African antelope
31. Insurance providers
33. Choosy
36. Ringworm
38. Unpolished
39. Drenches
41. Pant style
44. Son of Noah
45. Spiritual being
46. Upton Sinclair novel
48. Journalist Tarbell
49. Popular sports highlight

show

51. Born of
52. Rich tapestry
54. S. China seaport
56. State of being unclothed
60. Surrounded by
61. Residue
62. Away from wind
63. Dried-up
64. Visionary
65. A very large body of water
66. Garden tools
67. Screen type
68. Ancient Scandinavian poet

CLUES DOWN

1. Millisecond
2. Spanish city
3. A sudden very loud sound
4. "The Indiana Jones of beer"
5. Tin
6. Sea eagles
7. Volcanic crater
8. Type of coat
9. Women's apartments in Ottoman palace
10. Divulge a secret
11. Norwegian playwright
12. "It's a Wonderful Life" director
14. Poisonous perennial plant
17. 18-year astronomical period

20. Clothes

21. Places to sit
23. Family of regulator genes
25. New York ballplayer
26. Impressive in size or scope
27. Jacques __, French biologist
29. One from the Big Apple
30. Genus of woolly lemurs
32. Songs to one's beloved
34. Indigenous person of N.E. Thailand
35. Supplemented with difficulty
37. Farewell
40. Investment account (abbr.)
42. One from Utah
43. Begets
47. A male child
49. Break apart
50. Brief appearance
52. Partner to "oohed"
53. A light informal meal
55. Fabric with smooth, shiny surface
56. One billionth of a second
57. Ancient Italian-Greek colony
58. Close tightly
59. Mail out
61. Language
65. Computer characteristic

SOLUTION ON PAGE 23

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	6					9		

Level: Intermediate

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NEWS MEDIA

Carefree Fine Art & Wine Festival set for Jan. 16-18

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Thunderbird Artists' 33rd Annual Winter Carefree Fine Art & Wine Festival is set for Jan. 16-18 in Carefree.

The event, along Ho Hum and Easy Streets in downtown Carefree, features more than 150 local and national juried artists who will showcase and sell their original work from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. each day.

The event also features wine tastings, food vendors, and live entertainment.

A portion of proceeds from entry fees and wine ticket sales will be donated to the nonprofit Imprints of Honor (formerly Veterans Heritage Project).

The show's featured artist, bronze sculptor Mike Dwyer, is known for his captivating wildlife and figurative works that showcase his mastery of texture and form. Dwyer grew up amidst the untouched desert landscapes of Scottsdale, which sparked a life-long fascination with wildlife observation and study. Dwyer earned a master's degree in wildlife studies with a focus on Ornithology from Fort Hays State University.

Cave Creek jeweler Sarah Foster is also participating in the show. Foster grew up in Sedona, where she



Cave Creek jeweler Sarah Foster works in her studio. Foster is one of more than 150 artists participating in Thunderbird Artists Winter Carefree Fine Art & Wine Festival Jan. 16-18. (Courtesy of Sarah Foster)

was passionate about theater and music. She later earned a degree in communications and minored in theater management.

"I never thought about becoming a jeweler. I had plans to study

law," Foster said in a release.

A self-taught artist, Foster was able to create a necklace that was like the one she lost. She continued to experiment, taking class from time to time to hone her skills.

Now, 30 years later, Foster's work has evolved to contemporary artisan designs, featuring mixed metals together, such as silver, 18-karat gold and copper with beautiful, colorful gemstones, such as turquoise, labradorite, rainbow moonstone, and amethyst. She also designs some pieces by mixing three different colors of bronze.

"I attribute most of my success to my design eye," Foster said. "My creative process never stops... it keeps changing and evolving."

"My parents were big hikers, and I grew up exploring Sedona's backcountry and playing in the creek," Foster added. "I am fortunate in that I am surrounded by natural beauty. My current property includes more than 100 trees and is between two giant washes, so we see wildlife all the time."

Admission to the Winter Carefree Fine Art & Wine Festival is \$5. Parking is free. The wine tasting fee is \$30, which includes an engraved souvenir wine glass and 10 tasting tickets. Additional tickets may be purchased. Guests can also save time by purchasing admission and wine tasting tickets in advance online. This is also recommended since the entry gate is cash only. For details, call 480-837-5637 or visit ThunderbirdArtists.com.

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E	D	A	M		S		O	N	A	R		R	A	S
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9	3	4	6	5	2	1	7	8
2	1	8	3	7	4	6	5	9
6	7	5	9	8	1	3	4	2
7	9	2	1	4	8	5	6	3
1	5	3	2	6	9	7	8	4
4	8	6	7	3	5	2	9	1
3	4	9	5	2	7	8	1	6
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