

Community

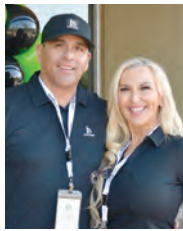
Goodyear approves new e-bike, scooter rules amid safety concerns; 4



LITCHFIELD PARK/GOODYEAR INDEPENDENT

Business

24-hour golf simulator opens in Goodyear; 8



May 2026 Volume 7 Issue 5

Your Nonpartisan Community Newspaper • YourValley.net



West Valley siblings lead the way at EMCC's graduation

West Valley alliance launches to provide rapid crisis relief

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

In the critical 48 hours following a family emergency, the difference between stability and collapse often comes down to a single phone call. A new West Valley alliance is making sure that call is answered.

Community leaders and first responders recently gathered to launch Just Ask, an outreach initiative designed to provide immediate relief to neighbors in crisis. Operating as the primary outreach arm of the nonprofit Sounds of Autism, Just Ask functions as a rapid-response bridge, delivering essential supplies like hygiene products, clothing, and home goods to vulnerable populations within two days of an emergency.

Larry Cervarich, who previously founded Homeless Youth Connection and Meals of Joy, leads the mission alongside Edward Brabham Jr., the executive director of distribution. Brabham, a supply

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

When Ashley Jenkins first pulled into the parking lot of Estrella Mountain Community College, she was not there to sign up for classes. She was just along for the ride while a family member took a placement test.

At the time, she was working mini-

mum-wage jobs, convinced the education system, one she said had ignored her since elementary school, was a closed door.

On Friday, May 15, that door will not just be open, she and her brother, Aaron, will have led the way through it as the Jenkins siblings join hundreds of graduates at Desert Diamond Arena for

EMCC's 2026 Commencement.

The siblings' path to the West Valley from Rochester, New York, was born of necessity. Aaron Jenkins had spent much of his adult life traveling, working in the fast-paced music industry as a producer across genres ranging from

• See **Siblings** on page 20

• See **Relief** on page 21



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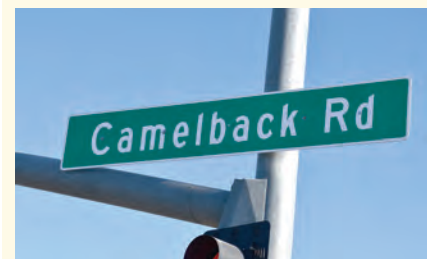
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City Council moves forward with safety infrastructure as residents raise concerns over truck traffic and development. (James Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

Litchfield Park approves \$200K for pedestrian underpass

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Litchfield Park City Council moved one step closer to realizing its vision for its new cultural hub by approving a \$200,000 contract to design a pedestrian underpass intended to protect residents from increasing traffic.

The project will bridge the gap between the La Loma Village area and the Fry's shopping center, running beneath Litchfield Road just south of the upcoming Hilltop School for the Arts.

Targeted for completion in spring 2027, the underpass will

• See **Underpass** on page 5

Goodyear approves new e-bike, scooter rules amid safety concerns

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Goodyear City Council has approved a new ordinance regulating electric bicycles and scooters, citing safety concerns as their use grows across the city.

The measure adds rules on where the devices can be used, how fast they can travel and who can operate them. It also establishes age limits, fines and DUI penalties.

Deputy Police Chief Jose Gonzalez said the ordinance is designed to create clear standards while aligning city ordinances with state law. Riders must follow posted speed limits and operate safely, he said, stating the goal is to reduce accidents and conflicts with pedestrians and vehicles.

"Our kids simply don't realize the dangers of operating these vehicles in and around big, heavy cars," said Gonzales. "We're trying to balance individuals' ability to use these devices ... but we're also trying to balance the safety."

The ordinance bars riders under 16 years old from using higher-speed e-bikes, prohibits those under 14 years old from riding most e-bikes



Goodyear ordinance sets age limits, fines and DUI penalties on e-bike and scooters. (James Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

and restricts children under 12 from using electric scooters. Helmets are required for riders under 16.

It also limits scooters on higher-speed roads, requires riders to use bike lanes when available and allows the city to restrict use in crowded areas such as parks.

Council members said the changes come after close calls and complaints from residents.

Councilmember Vicki Gillis shared a recent incident in which several young riders darted into traffic in

front of her vehicle resulting in a narrowly avoided accident.

"If I had killed those kids, I would have never forgiven myself," Gillis said. "That scared me like crazy."

Driving under the influence while operating the devices is prohibited under the ordinance, mirroring Arizona law, with potential penalties including jail time, fines and treatment requirements.

Most other violations will be handled as civil offenses, with fines start-

• See **Rules** on page 5

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Rules

- From page 4

ing at \$50 and increasing for repeat violations.

Police plan to focus first on public outreach rather than immediate enforcement. Gonzalez said the city will spend the next six months educating residents on the "do's and don'ts" of e-bikes and scooters through schools, social media and community engagement.

Full enforcement is expected to begin around November, though officers may still take action in serious cases before then.

"Keeping our community safe is always our top priority," said Goodyear Mayor Joe Pizzillo in a statement.

"As e-bikes and e-scooters become more common, it's important that we set clear expectations to protect both riders and those who share our roads and sidewalks. This ordinance gives us the tools to help prevent injuries, reduce collisions and ensure Goodyear remains a safe and welcoming place for everyone."

Officials said the ordinance aims to balance the convenience of e-bikes and scooters as a form of transportation with the need to improve safety, particularly for children.

Litchfield Park is also working towards regulating electric bicycles and scooters, modeling ordinances off of neighboring cities. Visit yourvalley.net/litchfield-park-independent to read more.

Visit goodyearaz.gov for information.

Underpass

- From page 4

mirror an existing pre-cast concrete arch system located north of Wigwam Boulevard. By funneling pedestrians beneath the roadway, officials hope to provide a safe route for students and seniors traveling between the historic downtown district and the new facilities rising on the La Loma hilltop.

The underpass is being designed to support a suite of major projects currently transforming the La Loma Hilltop including the Hilltop School for the Arts, a new Maricopa County Library and a larger location for P.W. Litchfield Heritage Center, all set to open near August 2026.

Visit litchfieldpark.gov for more information. Visit yourvalley.net/litchfield-park-independent to read more of the story.

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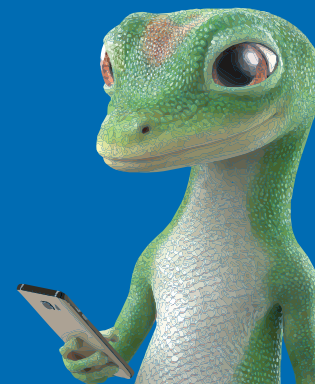
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Goodyear mayoral candidate withdraws from race citing health concerns

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Former Goodyear City Council member Bill Stipp has withdrawn from the city's mayoral race, citing health concerns following a recent medical diagnosis.

Stipp announced he is ending his campaign after an unexpected finding during an MRI led him to seek treatment at City of Hope Cancer Center. In a statement, he said the treatment will require the time and energy he had planned to devote to the campaign.

"It is with optimism and yet a heavy heart that I am forced to end my campaign for mayor," Stipp said. "While my circumstance is certainly life-altering, it is not life-ending. I must take a hard look at what matters most in life."

Stipp previously served three four-year terms on the Goodyear City Council and has a background in fire



Bill Stipp's withdrawal from the election leaves incumbent Joe Pizzillo as sole candidate ahead of July primary. (Submitted photo/City of Goodyear)

service and emergency management. He retired in 2025.

"I've always believed in being transparent and serving others, and I appre-

ciate the support as I step away for this time to focus on my family and myself," said Stipp.

Stipp's withdrawal leaves incumbent Mayor Joe Pizzillo as the only remaining candidate in the race. Pizzillo, who previously served alongside Stipp on the city council, sent Stipp well wishes.

"I was sorry to hear of Bill's health challenges," Pizzillo said. "I spent many years working with him on the city council and I wish him a very healthy and long life going forward."

The city's primary election is scheduled for July 21. The ballot includes the mayoral race as well as four candidates competing for three available City Council seats.

Check Independent Newsmedia in print and online at yourvalley.net for continuing elections coverage and to read more of the story.

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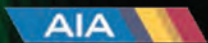
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BUSINESS

24-hour golf simulator opens in Goodyear

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Back Nine Golf has opened a new 24-hour indoor golf and entertainment venue in Goodyear, offering simulator play, training amenities and social events.

Franchise co-owner Michele Mitchell said the space was designed to accommodate both casual users and organized events, with large simulator bays that can be opened for corporate outings and group gatherings.

"We wanted something that could be flexible, from business events to families and leagues," Mitchell said. "It's not just about golf, it's about creating a place where people can gather."

Mitchell said the decision to open in Goodyear was driven by the city's rapid growth and strong community appeal. The location, a repurposed fitness



Rob Camacho and Michele Mitchell open a Back Nine location in Goodyear. (James Goldmeier/ Independent Newsmedia)

facility, follows a similar model used at the company's Paradise Valley site.

She said the Goodyear opening is part of a broader expansion strategy, with the franchise group planning addi-

tional growth over the next two years.

Co-owner Rob Camacho, a PGA professional with three decades of teaching experience, said the Back Nine concept reflects a shift in the golf

industry toward technology-driven training and entertainment.

The facility features Full Swing simulators that use dual-tracking technology to provide detailed swing metrics and virtual course experiences for players of all skill levels.

"Technology gives players data and feedback they can't always get on a traditional course," Camacho said. "It helps both new golfers and experienced players improve while still having fun."

The Goodyear location will initially offer public tee times, with plans to transition to a membership-based model as demand grows. Leagues, tournaments and themed events are also planned.

Visit thebackninegolf.com/goodyear-az/ or their new Goodyear location at 15367 W McDowell Rd, Site C2 for more information.

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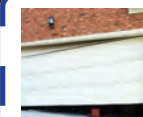
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BUSINESS MOVES



Compiled by James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

OPENINGS

- 1 The City of Goodyear recently announced **Flower Child** as a business coming to the GSQ downtown district. The restaurant is set to open in 2026, serving healthy, customizable bowls and wraps at 1900 N. Civic Square.
- 2 Abrazo West opened the doors to its **Nest**, providing comprehensive maternity and specialized OB care at 13677 W. McDowell Road, Goodyear.
- 3 **Yates Mitsubishi** has opened a new car dealership featuring a variety of vehicles and services at 13725 W. Test Drive, Goodyear.
- 4 **Chipotle** at 15600 W. McDowell Road, Goodyear, is now open, serving Mexican-inspired food with

in-store seating and a drive-thru pickup lane.

5 **Back Nine Golf** hosted a grand opening, offering 24-hour indoor golf simulators and training tools to members at 15367 W. McDowell Road, Suite C2, Goodyear.

6 Family owned **G&G Cake Decorating Supplies** is now open, selling premade cakes, specialty baking tools and decorating ingredients, at 245 N. Litchfield Road in Goodyear.

7 **Copper State Credit Union** is celebrating its 75th anniversary. The Goodyear location at 1270 N. Dysart Road provides banking services and has recently updated its digital platform.



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COMING SOON

8 **ViaWest Group** is developing a new industrial site for large-scale distribution and logistics use at Camelback Road and Loop 303, Goodyear. The site could include buildings ranging from about 75,000 to 850,000 square feet.

CLOSINGS

9 **Ribbons Tea House**, 111 W Honneysuckle St., Litchfield Park, plans to close its doors for the last time on Saturday May 30. The last day will be a celebration of its 11 years in the community through food, drinks, music and games.

IN BRIEF

MCSO seeks tips on shooting investigation at Litchfield Park teen party

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Investigators are seeking information to identify suspects after four teenagers were wounded in a shooting at a large house party in Litchfield Park.

Deputies with the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office recently responded to reports of shots fired near Florence Avenue and Jacobsen Drive.

Four victims, all believed to be teenagers, were taken to hospitals. None of the injuries were considered

• See **Shooting** on page 14



Maricopa County Sheriff Department officials seek more information on the party that had about 150 teens in attendance. (Metro Creative Connection)

Litchfield Elementary boosts spending to 71%

By James Goldmeer
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Litchfield Elementary School District is prioritizing classroom resources and teacher pay, as a shifting workforce and lean administrative spending shape its financial outlook, according to the latest Arizona Auditor General's report.

District Chief Financial Officer Michael Vaughan recently detailed how the LESD directs 71.3% of its operational budget to the classroom, a figure that outpaces state and peer averages.

While this efficiency allows for competitive compensation, Vaughan said the district's average teacher salary is influenced by a growing

number of new educators.

"Ultimately, this report is showing that in 2025, the district operated efficiently and this allowed us to push as much into the classroom as we did," Vaughan told the governing board.

Teacher pay and the 'muted average'

The district's average teacher salary for fiscal year 2025 stands at \$65,074. While this is slightly below the peer average of \$65,225, Vaughan explained that the figure is a "muted average" due to the district's hiring trends.

"If you think about what contrib-

• See **LESD** on page 14

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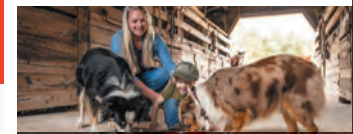
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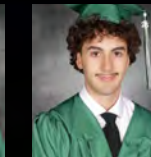
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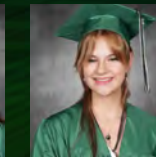
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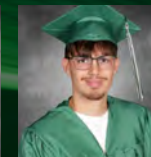
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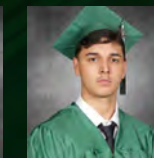
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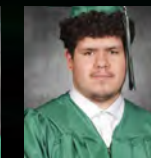
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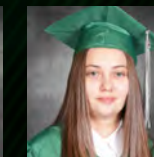
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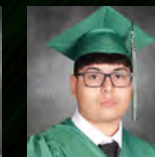
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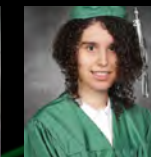
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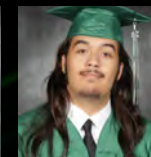
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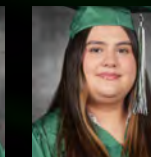
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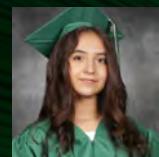
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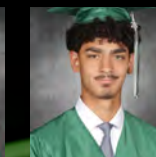
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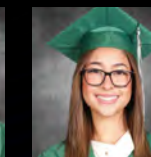
Alejandro Ochoa



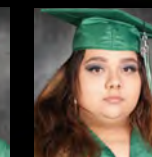
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Jaeleen Ordaz



Maria Ornelas



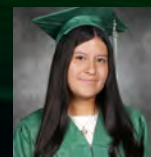
Marissa Ortega



Gianna Pacheco



Brayden Patton



Lexy Perez



Nathan Peroutka



Desmond Pickett



Aiyana
Plourd-Kirk



Gilbert Ponce



Lorenzo Joaquin
Recto



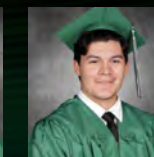
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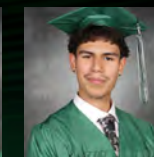
Mark Richardson



DeeAnn Rico



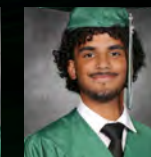
Evan Rodriguez



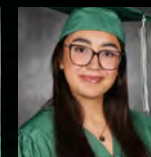
Peter Rodriguez



Amira
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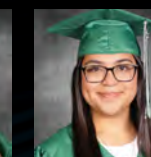
Riley Sanchez



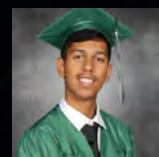
Lizbeth Sanchez
Rodriguez



Emma Schoger



Sofia Serrano



Dhiraj Sharma



Iysis Sherwood



Koda Shumway



Angel Singleton



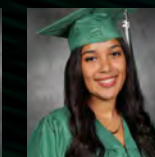
Makayla Sison



VanMichael
Smith



Michael Sullivan



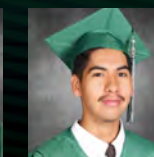
Anisa Talavera



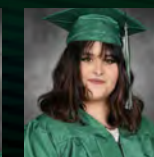
Mario Torres



Carley Totin



Jordan
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Aniyah Vargas



Fabian Vega



Allison Vogt



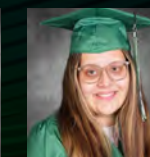
Sumaya Wahed



Carter Watson



James
Whitehead



Meadow
Wingfield



Kelsey Yazzie



LESD

• From page 11

utes to the average teacher's salary, it's all of the salaries of all of the teachers we have," Vaughan said. "And what we (are) seeing... is that the percentage of our teacher workforce that's in their first three years of experience is growing."

Because pay is primarily driven by level of education and experience, an influx of early-career teachers is pulling the average down.

Despite this, Litchfield's average remains higher than several neighboring districts, including Glendale Elementary (\$64,324), Tempe Elementary (\$64,167), and Roosevelt Elementary (\$63,038).

Top earners and administrative efficiency

The district maintains its competitive classroom spending by keeping administrative costs "very



Litchfield Elementary School District leaders highlight lean administration and competitive pay for top earners and new teachers. (Submitted photo/Sam Nunez)

low" compared to its peers. This lean approach extends to the district's leadership and management team.

The top-paid employees in the district include its core administrative and instructional leadership. According to district records, the highest-compensated roles currently include:

- ♦ Superintendent: \$180,000
- ♦ Assistant Superintendent:

\$139,764

♦ Chief Financial Officer:

\$118,026

♦ Directors and Principals:

\$114,030 to \$85,192

Vaughan said the district remains focused on maintaining opportunities that ensure that veteran educators are also rewarded for their tenure and expertise.

Visit lesd79.org for more information.

Shooting

• From page 11

life-threatening.

Investigators believe the shooting may have stemmed from a confrontation, though the exact circumstances remain under investigation.

"There are so many elements," said Juaquin Enriquez, a spokesman with MCSO, during a press briefing.

"We as detectives (need to) follow up, talk to more neighbors, to get some things that we missed, but we won't be able to do this without the public's help."

In a letter to families, the Agua Fria High School District said it became aware some students were involved in the incident, which occurred after a school prom but was not school-sanctioned.

No arrests have been announced. Visit mcso.org for more information and yourvalley.net/litchfield-park-independent to read more.



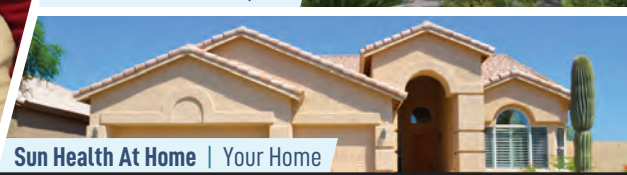
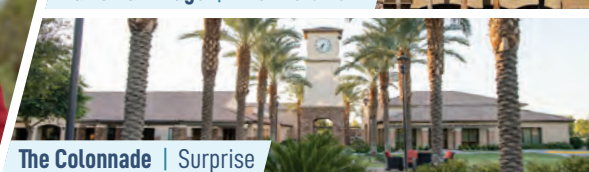
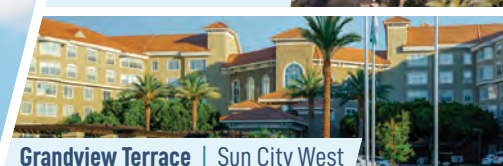
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Seniors make leap at Desert Edge track

Richard Smith
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Dayvon Standard and Asad Ali are making the most of their one year in the Desert Edge track program.

Standard transferred in from Buckeye right after his junior year and track season ended. He also hoped playing for the Scorpions would raise his recruiting profile.

"Last year went good. I topped out at 46-1 for triple jump, so my goal for this year was to get as close to 50 as possible and go for No. 1 in the state," Standard said.

Ali went to Oak Hills High School in California as a sophomore, then moved to Desert Edge last year. He did not race for the Scorpions, but it was not a wasted year.

"Racing Bellemy Amina-Harris last year, we would go back and forth and I wasn't always behind him," Ali said. "After that I thought I could be up there at the top."

In Standard sophomore year at Buckeye his friend Lucifer Pridgett introduced him to the triple jump

"I was an only long jump kind of guy. My first time doing triple jump at practice it just kind of took over. I learned this basics pretty fast and my first jump was a 42," Standard said.

This year's Brooks Chandler Rotary meet on March 20-21 served as the coming out party for both seniors as Scorpions.

Standard took a bow with a personal best triple jump of 47-11, good for second place at the elite level

behind Phoenix Sunnyslope senior Ajani Leggett. He also was second in the long jump at 22-6.

"It was a big meet to come back to, especially since there was a lot of weight and pressure on my shoulders. I feel like I handled it quite well," Standard said.

It was Ali's sixth meet of the year but his debut in the spotlight. He made his name by placing second in the 300-meter hurdles in 28.60, behind Mesa Red Mountain senior Matthew Heitz.

Ali also finished fourth in the 110-meter hurdles in 14.61 behind two California sprinters and Oro Valley Ironwood Ridge junior Jett Merrill.

"That was the biggest meet and the most fun meet. We all did good,"

Ali said.

The next big meet, the Division II championships, was May 7 and 9 and results were not available at press time.

Ali and Standard said they're both looking forward to the final state meet May 15-16 at Mesa Community College. Both credited Selph with preparing them to face Arizona's best.

"It's really a great environment, especially with the Oklahoma State connection. We've got that little thing in common and it's cool. Every day in practice he pushes us and drives us. He really wants us to be great so it feels good to have a good coach by your back," Standard said.

Ali said he wants to run a 13.9 in

• See **Seniors** on page 16

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Seniors

• From page 15

the 110-meter hurdles and 37 in the 300.

He also praised his coach.

"I think it's great. He teaches us how to be a young man. He motivates us every practice that we've got to work because the other kids are working hard," Ali said.

Colleges are starting to catch on to Ali. He said he wants to study accounting.

Grambling State, Chicago State, Central Arizona College, Glendale Community College have all shown interest in Ali.

"They're just starting to take notice, because last year I had to sit out the whole year. I was on nobody's radar," Ali said. "My goal was to pop out this year and get on somebody's radar."

Meanwhile, Standard did some-

thing increasingly rare in February. He caught 23 passes for 463 yards and 10 touchdowns in six games this football season.

Oklahoma State was watching the 6-4 receiver and offered him a scholarship. In this era of the transfer portal and NIL money and the transfer portal, a team in the power four conferences offering a player after his senior season is virtually unheard of.

It gives Standard another link to Selph, who sprinted for the Cowboys a decade ago. Standard goes to Stillwater at the end of this month. He plans to study business.

"I'd say my recruiting process was really an emotional roller coaster. I've done my best to stay down, stay grounded and keep my faith in God and let him take over," Standard said. "When I really got the call, all the pressure relieved from my body a bit. I knew that my transfer here was for a good reason."



Desert Edge senior hurdler Asad Ali, left, track and field coach Sharod Selph, center, and senior jumper Dayvon Standard, right, pose for a photo May 5 in front of the Goodyear school's locker rooms. (Independent Newsmedia/Richard Smith)

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THINGS TO DO

Heritage Lecture Series: Dolan Ellis

10-11 a.m. on Thursday, May 21

Goodyear City Hall – Council Chambers, 1900 N Civic Square, Goodyear

Arizona's Official State Balladeer shares stories from his memoir regarding his illustrious career in folk music and his travels across the state.

Dive In Movie: "A Minecraft Movie"

7-9 p.m. on Saturday, May 23

100 S. Old Litchfield Rd, Litchfield Park

Kick off the summer season by watching a feature film while floating in the pool; guests are encouraged to bring their own swim rings and noodles. Doors open at 7:00 PM with the movie

beginning at 7:30 PM, and admission is required for non-members.

Memorial Day Ceremony

8 a.m. on Monday, May 25

WWII Memorial at Litchfield Elementary School, 255 Wigwam Blvd, Litchfield Park

Mayor Thomas L. Schoaf leads a 30-minute public tribute to fallen service members featuring patriotic music, a floral tribute, and the playing of Taps.

After Hours Art Talk: Butter, But Make It Art

7-8:30 p.m. on Tuesday, May 26

City Hall at GSQ, 1900 N. Civic Square, Goodyear

Artist Fanny Hicks discusses her unconventional transition from professional baking to sculpting a giant cow out of butter.



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ENTERTAINMENT

West Valley Arts Council brings live comedy to Litchfield Park

By James Goldmeier

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The West Valley Arts Council is pivoting from the gallery to the microphone this month, hosting its “Litchfield Laughs” adult comedy showcase.

The show features a lineup of professional comedians including Zac Allen, Darryl Graves, and Jason Pierce, all hosted by Jetuan Whedon. Whedon, a self-described “part mom, part nerd, and part ‘bro,’” is a comic who performs in venues ranging from nursing homes to clubs. She is also an award-winning balloon artist.

“I love being a bit of sunshine in someone’s day,” said Whedon in an on-line artist’s statement. “Comedy, public speaking, or balloon art are my way of bringing more joy into the world.”

The move into stand-up comedy is a deliberate expansion of the West Valley Arts Council’s mission. Kathy Knecht,



Headlined by award-winning entertainer Jetuan Whedon, the adult comedy showcase aims to spark a “desire for more” live performance in the Southwest Valley. (James Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

the Council’s Executive Director, says the organization is leaning into the “S” in “Arts” to ensure the West Valley is recognized for more than just visual works.

“Our mission is very broad. We want to make the West Valley a place where arts and culture is happening and people have tons of opportunities to engage,” Knecht said. “Any time we can bring

live entertainment, we know that we’re stimulating people’s appetite for more.”

Hosted from 7-8:30 on Friday, May 29 at the Litchfield Park Arts Center the event also serves as a spotlight for the Council’s history and its future.

The WVAC was founded in 1969 in a church in Litchfield Park, the Council is returning to its roots while utilizing new technology like Culturalyst, a digital platform designed to connect local artists with consumers.

“We want to be the hub of arts and culture in the West Valley,” Knecht added. “We want people to type in ‘What is there to do in Goodyear or Litchfield Park?’ and find these festivals and shows, putting the West Valley on the map for high-quality entertainment so they don’t automatically assume they have to drive east.”

Tickets for Litchfield Laughs can be purchased at westvalleyarts.org.



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Desert Springs Church expands to meet regional growth

By James Goldmeier
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

As the West Valley continues growing, Goodyear's Desert Springs Community Church is transforming its 10-acre campus to ensure there is "room at the table" for its neighbors.

The church is currently in the middle of "The Impact Project," an expansion designed to accommodate a community expected to grow to 230,000 residents by the end of the decade.

The most visible sign of this progress is the skeleton of a new 20,720-square-foot multi-purpose worship center, visible near Indian School Road and Bullard Avenue, rising on the property. The current construction follows a successful phase one completion in 2024, which expanded parking and modernized youth facilities.

"In 2018, we met and we said, we're

full," said Jim Glass, Vice Chair of the church's elder team. "Our classrooms were full. We didn't have room for our kids. Our parking lot was full...We're really bumping up against maxing out (our current) space."

The new facility is not just about Sunday services. Designed with a flat floor and large roll-up doors, Glass said the building will function as a "third space" for the Goodyear area.

Plan features include expanded capacity, meeting spaces, and a community hub featuring a coffee station.

"We want that to be available for everyone in the community," Glass said. "We'll welcome it if somebody wants to come to work, or they want to come and just hang out and talk."

Leadership expects the new worship center to be completed by Summer 2027.

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FROM THE COVER

Siblings

• From page 1

opera to EDM. But in 2022, a phone call changed everything: their father, someone Aaron describes as a proud military veteran, had been hospitalized in Arizona with a chronic condition.

"That really scared me," Aaron Jenkins recalled. "I was like, that's it. I'm wrapping up, and I'm going to Phoenix to be with my family."

The transition wasn't easy. Aaron Jenkins spent two years in what he describes as a deep depression, navigating the complexities of caregiving. It was a suggestion from his father and the observation of his sister's interest in school that finally pushed him to enroll.

For Ashley Jenkins, the motivation was a desire to escape the cycle of low-pay labor.

"I was just tired," she said. "I knew I had so much more to offer. I wanted to

find what I was actually good at."

Redefining success

Both siblings said they struggled in the traditional K-12 system. Aaron Jenkins was a high school dropout and Ashley Jenkins said she felt like a ghost in her own classrooms.

"Anytime I would raise my hand and ask questions, I got overlooked," Ashley Jenkins said. "That's why I thought I'd never be going back. But since we started here, it's been a different universe. We went from struggling to both being straight-A students."

Their success caught the attention of faculty. Professors recommended both for the Peer Leader program, a role that turned the once-hesitant students into what Aaron Jenkins calls the college's "cheerleaders."

As Peer Leaders, they act as a bridge for students who may be as intimidated as they once were. They facilitate introductions between nervous

freshmen and professors and other community support the school offers.

"Our job is to make sure students know they aren't alone," Aaron Jenkins said. "Sometimes kids are afraid to talk to professors because they're 'adults.' We make those connections. We tell them, 'Hey, I know you're struggling with this, here are the resources we have.'"

While they share a household and a workplace, the Jenkins's academic goals are distinct. But, being raised by a mother who works as a sign language interpreter, both siblings developed a fascination with linguistics.

Ashley Jenkins is graduating with an Associate of Arts in anthropology. She plans to transition to Arizona State University to study for a master's in English and Linguistics.

"I want to be the person they call when they find a lost tablet in the pyramids and need someone to translate the hieroglyphics," she said.

Aaron Jenkins is taking a clinical route. Aiming for a doctorate in clinical neuropsychology at ASU, he wants to serve as a language liaison for patients.

Inspired by his experience taking his father to the Veterans Administration, he hopes to help patients translate what their bodies and brains are trying to tell them into statements medical professionals can understand.

The impact of students like the Jenkins siblings resonates beyond the classroom. EMCC President Dr. Rey Rivera said the West Valley's rapid growth requires leaders who understand the local landscape.

"Ashley and Aaron have spent their time at EMCC dedicated to helping their fellow students succeed. To see them reach that same success is special," Rivera said. "The West Valley continues to grow and our graduates are the ones helping shape the future of our communities."

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FROM THE COVER

Relief

• From page 1

chain veteran, said the operation is fundamentally about people rather than logistics.

“At Just Ask, we’re committing to our community in a meaningful way, supporting individuals and families in crisis, standing on the side of first responders and parting with organizations like Sounds of Autism,” said Brabham. “When you see a need, when you hear a call for help, don’t look away. When someone’s searching for a fresh start, the idea is that we are here for them to just ask. We are here together, support you, and we will be there to respond.”

While rapid delivery is a cornerstone of the mission, Just Ask is using its funding to reshape how the West Valley handles long-term reintegration and public safety. The organization provides specialized training for first



Larry Cervarich, Edward Brabham Jr. and Cricket Barrientos launch the Just Ask outreach program to provide rapid relief and reintegration services for vulnerable Arizona populations. (James Goldmeier/Independent Newsmedia)

responders, medical professionals and public officials, focusing on the nuances of interacting with neurodiverse individuals to ensure emergency encounters are handled with de-escalation and understanding.

Just Ask funds specialized training for first responders and public officials. These sessions focus on the nuances of interacting with individuals on the autism spectrum and other at-risk

populations, ensuring that emergency encounters are handled with de-escalation and understanding.

The organization supports city programs designed to support residents in vulnerable circumstances, helping municipalities expand their reach to those who might otherwise fall through the cracks. Through its support of Sounds of Autism, Just Ask funds reintegration programs. These services are not ex-

clusive to the autistic community; they are designed for any individual in an at-risk population, including those recovering from addiction or individuals re-entering society after incarceration, who may need help regulating or readjusting to daily life.

As the West Valley continues to grow, local agencies say the infrastructure for compassion must grow alongside the population. Goodyear Fire Chief Paul Luizzi said the program fills a critical void for the city’s crisis response teams.

It’s just tremendous for us to find that resource and then also have a very local and committed resource to us,” said Luizzi. “(Sound of Autism and Just Ask) support our crisis response team and our community assistance team through the police department. Those two programs are really very beneficial to our city, but they aren’t helpful unless we have those resources.”

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Civility Checklist

*How to engage in respectful, honest
& civil dialogue about public issues*

- ☐ **Take the high road.** Respond to the topic — not the person. Refrain from demonizing others for their opinions. Assume those you disagree with are, like you, genuinely interested in improving the community.
- ☐ **Be respectful.** Bullying, public humiliation, insults, name-calling, harassment, and threats directed at another person — or that person's race, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc. — have no place in civil discussions. Find ways to respectfully disagree without questioning someone's character or motives.
- ☐ **Be truthful.** Base your opinions/arguments on facts. Value honesty. Make only accurate statements when making your point and avoid exaggeration and stereotypes. When appropriate, cite your sources of information that others may question.
- ☐ **Don't misrepresent.** Always identify your opinions as opinions (not stating opinions as facts). Never misrepresent the views of others or falsely claim your opinions represent someone else. If quoting the words of others, identify and credit the source.
- ☐ **Listen & learn.** It's both polite and respectful to listen to those we disagree with (as well as those we support) and be genuine in our attempts to understand their point of view. Expand your mind by thoughtfully seeking out views that don't agree with your own.
- ☐ **Look for common ground.** When disagreeing with others, look for even small areas of agreement — which can be the gateway to working together for the greater good.
- ☐ **Respect privacy.** Keep private things private — whether it involves your own information or those with whom you disagree. Revealing private information about someone else is rude, unethical, potentially harmful and, in many cases, illegal.
- ☐ **Set a good example.** Practice civil behavior online as well as in public and in your interaction with others. Encourage others to practice these civil behaviors. And it's OK to challenge disrespectful behavior — but be courteous, respectful and helpful in your approach.



Now that you've read the checklist, take
the Civility Pledge at [yourvalley.net/
civility-pledge](http://yourvalley.net/civility-pledge).

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1



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2



Create a Personal Pension

Generate income you cannot outlive.

3



Prepare for Life's "What If's"

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