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THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Fresno's favorite backdrop turns 10 Muralist FranCisco Vargas' history lesson stands unfaded and ready to serve



File Photo | FranCisco Vargas spent the better part of six months in 2014 completing the Fresno Mural Stamp.

Gabriel Dillard - EDITOR

Fresno's most Instagram-ready mural — a 4,250 square-foot history lesson and focal point for downtown life — is turning 10.

On the morning of June 7, 2014, muralist FranCisco Vargas unveiled the Fresno Stamp Mural at 1315 Van Ness Ave., the home of The Business Journal. Measuring 35 feet by 125 feet, the mural has become a popular backdrop for

selfies, graduation pictures, car glamour shots and music videos.

It may be one of the most accessible and utilized pieces of public art in town, with the word "Fresno" spelled in letters 10-feet-tall leaving no doubt about the subject matter.

"More than other murals, you want to have yourself in front of it," said Elliott Balch, president and CEO of the Downtown Fresno Partnership, which originally commissioned the

work. "It's a caption for the picture."

Kyle Lowe, operations manager for CMAC (Community Media Access Collaborative) in Downtown Fresno, has a personal connection to Vargas, the artist. In the late '90s, his family commissioned late Fresno artist Danny Perez to paint a faux brick wall in their house. Perez brought along Vargas. They spent about two months on the

Stamp Mural | Page 3

Specialty citrus meets gin, awards ensue



Photos Contributed | Eric Olson, owner of Central Coast Distillery in Atascadero is the master distiller that crafted the unique flavor of Walheim Ranch Gin.

Ben Hensley - STAFF WRITER

A local specialty citrus is being recognized for the unique gin it can produce.

Lance Walheim is the owner of Walheim Ranch Gin, a collaboration between him and Eric Olson, owner of Atascadero's Central Coast Distillery.

What sets Walheim Ranch gin apart from other gins, Walheim said, is its citrus overtones that come from the fresh rind of Exeter-grown bergamot sour orange, with hints of Earl grey Tea, fennel and other botanicals.

Bergamot is a type of citrus, with bergamot oranges appearing yellow or green,

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Meet the 2024 honorees of the fourth-annual Family Owned Business Awards

Winners to be announced July 30

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THE BUSINESS JOURNAL



FAMILY OWNED BUSINESS AWARDS

PERIODICAL:
TIME
SENSITIVE
PRIORITY
HANDLING



OUR FUTURE IS ABOUT IMPROVING YOURS

100 years ago, six pioneering physicians had the bold idea to form an organization that was rooted in scientific research that would lead heart patients to a better outcome through treatment and prevention. In the century that followed, their idea - the **American Heart Association** - has grown to become the nation's oldest voluntary health organization with more than 40 million volunteers and supporters dedicated to improving heart health and reducing deaths from cardiovascular diseases and stroke. One bold idea, brought to life by bold hearts, has resulted in more than \$5 billion invested in research to ensure all people have the opportunity to live longer, healthier lives.



Since our founding, we have made a profound impact by removing barriers to equitable health, advancing scientific discovery, educating the public, and advocating for healthy workplaces and communities. In California, we have funded more than \$600 million in research grants for scientists at various institutions, taught CPR to generations of Californians and advocated for public health policies like protecting our kids from the dangers of flavored tobacco and nicotine products and ensuring all kids have access to breakfast and lunch at school. Right here in the Central Valley we're expanding access to lifesaving CPR skills, ensuring local heart and stroke patients have access to the latest science-based treatments via our hospital programs, and supporting community members managing high blood pressure with tools and resources for better blood pressure control. These bold moves are fueled by our mission and have helped transform our community's health.



As the American Heart Association marches forward into its second century, we are focused on championing equitable health in our communities. This means reducing barriers to nutrition security, controlling high blood pressure and protecting our youth from the scourge of tobacco and nicotine, all while continuing to fuel scientific advances. As we take our first steps into our next 100 years with bold hearts and eyes forward, we extend our thanks to the volunteers and donors whose commitment and support carry us into the future.

With Gratitude to our Second Century campaign sponsor in the Central Valley.



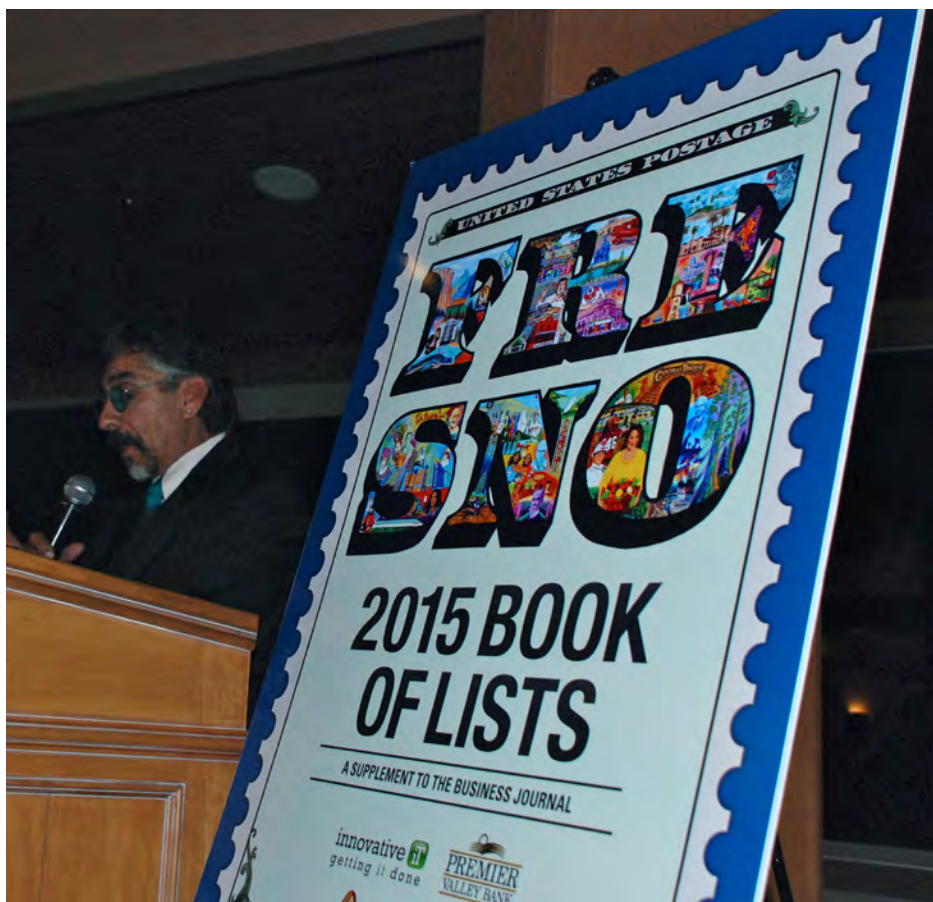
To join our effort, contact Andrea Melendez Fuentes, Development Director, Central Valley, at Andrea.Melendezfuentes@heart.org.

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File Photo | Muralist Francisco Vargas speaks at the 2015 Book of Lists party. His mural was adapted to the publication's cover.

Stamp Mural | From 1

project. Kyle, then 7 or 8, got in on the fun.

“They put a paintbrush in my hand, and I helped out when I could,” Lowe said. “That’s a very special memory for me and my family.”

As a professional director who helps others learn the craft of filmmaking and content creation, Lowe noted its popularity as a shooting location. The mural faces northwest, meaning it’s not as susceptible to sun damage and is usually shaded for people wishing to film.

“It’s a great location to set the scene for Downtown Fresno,” Lowe said. “As soon as you see it, you know where you are.”

The mural consists of more than 50 individual scenes of Fresno notables past and present. One of the most famous living people in the mural is Broadway star Audra McDonald, who adorns the “S.”

Broadway playwright and beloved

author William Saroyan is on the “F.”

Like the song “Come and Get Your Love” by the band Redbone, featured in the “Guardians of the Galaxy” movie in 2014? Founding brothers Pat and Lolly Vegas grew up in Fresno. They’re depicted in Native American garb in the mural, holding a red bone and staring down at passersby from the letter “N.”

There are business, historical and even advertising figures including farm labor leader Cesar Chavez, early Fresno physician Dr. Chester Rowell, agriculturalist M. Theo Kearney, businessman Frank Caglia and Lorraine-Collett Petersen, the original Sun-Maid raisin girl.

In addition to showing images from Fresno’s history, the mural is very much an aspirational piece of art. It features scenes of the African Adventure exhibit at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo, which

Stamp Mural | Page 4



THE RIGHT CARE RESTORES HOPE AND JOY.

Community Health Partners is honored to include Nicole Takeda, M.D., among our talented provider team. Dr. Takeda, a Fresno native, is a dedicated bariatric surgeon passionate about helping Valley residents live stronger and healthier lives. She completed her residency training in general surgery at the University of California, San Francisco-Fresno, where she honed her surgical skills and earned accolades in patient care and medical education. Dr. Takeda is driven by a profound sense of duty to serve the people of the Central Valley, and she remains steadfast in her mission to deliver compassionate patient care to every person she serves. Her visionary approach to bariatric surgery is transforming bodies, changing lives and restoring hope and vitality to those in need.



At Community Health Partners, we’re proud to work with the Valley’s brightest minds, like Nicole Takeda, M.D.. **So, no matter the need, it’s met by a community of the best healthcare providers.**



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Stamp Mural | From 3

actually opened a year after the mural's debut.

It also has scenes that have yet come to pass, including architect Arthur Dyson's design of the long proposed Fresno aquarium and a high-speed rail train cutting through farmland.

It took about six months for Vargas to complete the mural, with help from local artists Mauro Carrera, Ma Ly, Patti Calvert, Rudy Contreras, Richard Bustamante, Nigel Robertson and Stephanie Allison each contributing individual scenes.

The scenes in each letter meant something to Vargas, who died of cancer a year after completing the Fresno Stamp Mural. One of them, a brunette woman in a yellow dress holding a basket of produce in the letter "O", was his own creation.

"The lady carrying the basket, I fabricated her out of pictures that I've seen because I wanted someone to represent a nice, beautiful, wholesome young lady that's holding all the fruits and vegetables because Fresno is the fruit basket of the world," Vargas told the Business Journal ahead of the 2014 unveiling.

Vargas died of Hodgkin's lymphoma on Sept. 7, 2015. In January of that year, he joined The Business Journal as a guest at our annual Book of Lists party. The cover for that year's publication



Fresno Housing image | A proposed affordable housing complex would obscure the street view of the mural.

was adapted from the mural.

It was early on that the mural also became a symbol for downtown and a gateway for Fulton Street — the epicenter of downtown revitalization efforts. Then-Downtown Fresno Partnership Interim CEO Craig Scharton remarked in 2014 about its ability to catch eyes.

"When people drive into downtown from the northern part of downtown or the Tower District, it's one of those things that's a pleasant surprise. It

reconnects and makes you feel good about where you are," Scharton said.

Visibility from the street is one of the mural's most gripping characteristics, though multi-story housing and mixed-use projects that have been proposed would obscure the view. One project from 2020 by Tutelian & Co. would've included a viewing platform for the mural inside a parking garage, but it didn't get off the ground.

With the sale of the nearby vacant

CVS building to Fresno Housing, current plans for the block include a multi-story affordable housing complex. Balch with the Downtown Fresno Partnership acknowledges that would lessen the impact of the mural, but a mural that celebrates Downtown Fresno is also subject to the winds of change.

"The answer can't be to leave a parking lot there forever," Balch said.

Gabriel Dillard | Editor can be reached at: 490-3467 or e-mail gabriel@thebusinessjournal.com

2024 Health Care

COMING SOON | JUNE 28TH, 2024

Health Care makes a strong case for itself as the most important industry in the Central Valley economy.

In fact, hospitals in Fresno, Kings, Madera, and Tulare counties generate \$19.5 billion in spending and directly and indirectly employed 130,723 people. Health care employment is primed to grow between 33-58% all according to the Hospital Council of Northern and Central California.

If you would like to reach the Central Valley health care industry, contact us today!

Call us at (559) 490-3422 or email abner@thebusinessjournal.com

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2024 FOBA HONOREE – SMALL BUSINESS

Orloff Jewelers: An education in luxury

Estela Anahi Jaramillo - STAFF WRITER

With over 60 years in business, Orloff Jewelers has been named an honoree for The Business Journal's 2024 Family Owned Business Awards.

Orloff Jewelers was started in 1955 by Paul Orloff on Tulare Street as Paul Orloff Diamond Company. In 1968, he moved the business to Fulton Street/Fulton Mall and changed the name to Prince Orloff Crown Jewels.

In 1980, James Orloff joined the company as a graduate gemologist and opened a second location at the Manchester Center Mall. Then, the business moved again in 1982 to Fig Garden Village and changed the name to Prince Orloff & Son Jewelers.

After Paul Orloff retired from Orloff & Sons, James and Mary Ann Orloff decided to start with a smaller location in 1990 with three employees.

They made several moves, gradually growing from a 500-square-foot store with three employees in North Point Center to 1,820 square feet with six employees in Fig Garden Village to the

current location in Fig Garden Village, 5,460 square feet with 16 full-time and three part-time employees.

They have grown their brand by adding professional services, jewelry repair and manufacturing, watch repair, cleaning services and appraisals.

"Being a finalist for the Family Owned Business Award means acknowledging the dedication, unity, and resilience of my family. It represents the culmination of our hard work, shared values, and unwavering commitment to success. It is a testament to our ability to navigate challenges together, embrace innovation, and build a lasting legacy. This recognition validates the sacrifices we have made and the passion we have poured into our business. It is a reminder that family is not just a foundation but also a driving force behind our achievements," said Mary Ann Orloff.

In 2022, Orloff Jewelers began their succession plan, working with a business advisor, attorney and



File Photo | Max and James Orloff inspect watches.

accountant to structure the future success of both the business and the successor.

Their son Maxwell and son-in-law Greg Yakrus will be moving forward with the business. Maxwell Orloff has a higher education degree in public policy and procedure and marketing, as well as a Master's. Yakrus is a CPA with 15 years of experience in the luxury business.

Orloff Jewelers' succession training begins with getting to know and

understand all the makings of a fine jewelry business. This is followed by training in jewelry, watch appraisals and objects of art. Maxwell and Yakrus will become well-rounded professionals trained in this field. Orloff Jewelers has a five-year plan and approximately three years to complete the transition, with two years of support.

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2024 FOBA HONOREE – SMALL BUSINESS

Pappy's Fine Foods: A seasoned competitor

Frank Lopez - STAFF WRITER

For 40 years now, Pappy's Fine Foods has been bringing blended seasonings, sauces and marinades to kitchen tables and restaurants in the Central Valley — and beyond.

Acquired in 1985, the company has been run by three generations of the Papulias family, with Edward Papulias serving as Pappy's Fine Foods CEO.

Along with producing 25 different products, Pappy's also does co-

packing for companies including Harris Ranch Beef Co., Pizza My Heart and Deli Delicious.

The co-packing side of the business is what allows Pappy's to grow and expand.

Alex "Pappy" Papulias started Pappy Meat Company in Fresno in 1960. He passed in 1981, leaving his wife Marie, four sons and one daughter to run the business.

Marie and Edward, who was attending college at the time, decided to steer the company in a different direction, with a focus on specialty seasonings and sauces.

In 1985 Edward began manufacturing the first products as Pappy's Choice Seasoning out of the back end of Pappy Meat Co., distributing to a few supermarkets under the name of Pappy's Fine Foods.

The company has since grown, and today boasts a revamped website, an Amazon store front, and is taking on large co-packing opportunities and growing their corporate holiday gift department.

Though there is no succession

plan in place, there are plans to grow the company together as a family over the next five years and then revisit to see what the next step will be—to sell the company or keep it going to the next generation.

To give back to their community, the company donates and provides sponsors the Marjaree Mason Center, Poverello House, St. Agnes Medical Center fundraisers and Sisters of the Holy Cross.

Edward's daughter Madison, who works at the family business as a receptionist, said the family is grateful to be considered for the award.

"We are excited and honored to be recognized by The Business Journal with this nomination," said Madison.

Frank Lopez | Writer can be reached at: 490-3465 or e-mail frank@thebusinessjournal.com



Photo contributed | Three generations of the Papulias family have elevated Pappy's Fine Foods to a national brand.



2024 FOBA HONOREE – SMALL BUSINESS

Shinkawa Dental: Definition of family dentistry

Ben Hensley - STAFF WRITER

Founded in 1977, Shinkawa Dental, owned and operated by Gerald Shinkawa, DDS, has provided for Central Valley dental needs for nearly 50 years and truly puts the “family” in family dentistry.

With three licensed, practicing dentists spanning two generations, Gerald and his children, Adam and Nicole, each practice dentistry with a passion for serving clients in underserved communities including veterans and local homeless populations.

Adam joined the team in 2016 with Nicole joining in 2020. Gerald’s wife, Sandra, also works as the practice’s administrator.

“Our family is honored for this recognition,” Nicole said. “We are incredibly thankful for the love and support from our community.”

After opening in 1977 near Manchester Mall, Shinkawa Dental moved to its current location near Fresno and Nees avenues.

The new location offers

additional space for the practice as well as the opportunity to enhance their patients’ experience by utilizing advanced technology.

In their spare time, the Shinkawa family volunteers in the area, giving back to the community to whom they feel they owe thanks for the continued success of the practice.

For the past five years, Shinkawa Dental and the Poverello House have partnered for a holiday canned food drive.

“We love providing care to our community through education as well as hosting canned food drives, volunteering with clothing drives, donating water during shortages when it’s hot out,” Nicole said. “We always try and find new ways to serve the Fresno community because they’ve been so supportive and allowed us opportunities to provide for them.”

Shinkawa Dental is located at 7760 N. Fresno St. Suite #105 in Fresno.

Ben Hensley | Writer can be reached at: 490-3461 or e-mail ben@thebusinessjournal.com



Photo contributed by Shinkawa Dental | Gerald Shinkawa and his children Adam and Nicole are the practitioners behind Shinkawa Dental.



2024 FOBA HONOREE – MEDIUM BUSINESS

Inspiration Travel: Faith-centered experiences

Ben Hensley - STAFF WRITER

Fresno-based Christian travel management firm Inspiration Travel serves customers from around the globe with faith-centered travel experiences, meticulously planned to cultivate life-changing experiences for clients.

First established in 1981 as Christian Cruise Conferences, Inspiration Travel is in its second generation of leadership. After acquiring the business in 1994, Current owners Steve and Ruth Dick oversaw consistent evolution of the business with new services, destinations and creative design.

Inspiration Travel has attracted numerous pastors and performers to connect clients with their spiritual inspiration. The company has partnered with globally recognized artists including Michael W. Smith and Gospel Music Celebration, as well as authors and spiritual leaders Greg Laurie and Kay Arthur.

Stephanie Dueck Smith, daughter of Steve and Ruth, joined the company in 2005 and, in 2018, was



Photo contributed by Inspiration Travel | The team at Inspiration Travel, led by owners Steve and Ruth Dick and their daughter Stephanie Dueck Smith, gives Christian travelers the trips of their lives.

named executive vice president. Stephanie’s husband, Joshua also joined in 2008, overseeing marketing and creative elements for the company.

Despite drawing tourists from around the world, Inspiration Travel prides itself on being locally owned and operated.

“It means a lot to be nominated

for this award specifically because it’s a local award and we take great pride in being located in Fresno,” Smith said. “To be recognized as a nominee in the medium-business family-owned category is truly exceptional for us.”

Inspiration Travel has also taken proactive steps to continue monitoring the ever-evolving

travel situation in Israel, updating their travel page with pop-ups and crucial information for tourists.

Inspiration Travel boasts a client base of more than 1,500 different organizations and nearly 240,000 travelers.

Ben Hensley | Writer can be reached at: 490-3461 or e-mail ben@thebusinessjournal.com



2024 FOBA HONOREE — MEDIUM BUSINESS



Photo contributed by John Ventresca Company | Giana, John and Nick Ventresca pose for a picture at a worksite. Their company has operated for 22 years.

John Ventresca Company & Ventresca Company Enterprises: Marrying innovation and craftsmanship

Frank Lopez - STAFF WRITER

For the first time, Fresno's John Ventresca Company & Ventresca Company Enterprises is an honoree for the Family Owned Business Awards.

The business has been providing masonry work and products completed in a safe manner for over 20 years and aims to deliver high quality work while incorporating innovative technologies and old world craftsmanship.

The company is currently run by 2nd and 3rd generations of the family — John, Lucianna, Nicolas and Giana Ventresca.

Some of the services provided by John Ventresca Company include the application of real stone and fabricated stone veneers, cinder block perimeter walls, hardscapes and handcrafting architectural

limestone.

The company's history was borne out of the Guido Ventresca Plastering business, founded by the first generation from Italy, Guido and Doris Ventresca. Their son, John, identified the need for masonry services while working for his father, and with his wife Lucianna, founded the John Ventresca Company 22 years ago.

The primary physical site is in Fresno, but they serve the entire Central Valley and Central Coast areas and have ongoing business in Fresno, Kern, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo counties.

The company survived and even prospered through the 2008 economic crash, and later stormed through the Covid-19 pandemic, utilizing Paycheck Protection Program funds to persevere.

John's son, Nicolas, joined the family business over 10 years ago, but had already been familiar with the business operations.

Nicolas said the family is excited to just be nominated for the awards.

"It's been a good year for us and we are hoping it keeps up," Nicolas said. "With so many amazing and long-standing small businesses here in the Central Valley it is truly an honor to be nominated for such a prestigious award."

Frank Lopez | Writer can be reached at: 490-3465 or e-mail frank@thebusinessjournal.com



2024 HONOREE – LARGE BUSINESS

Baloian Farms: Forever changing



Photo contributed by Baloian Farms | Five generations of the Baloian family has worked at Baloian Farms, dating back to 1917.

Alex Light - STAFF WRITER

Since 1917, Baloian Farms has remained one of the oldest family-owned businesses in the Central San Joaquin Valley.

Baloian Farms is a vertically integrated family farm specializing in premium quality vegetables, including bell peppers, eggplant, mini peppers, cucumbers and squash. They also have a wet veg program focusing on leaf, romaine, spinach and cauliflower.

Established by Charles Baloian in the early 1900s, Baloian Farms began as a wholesaler in Fresno before the business was taken

over by the next generation. They started representing small growers in the area, which helped foster the company's growth. Some 105 years later, five generations have worked on the farm, with Tim Baloian, Charles Baloian's grandson, in the role of CEO and owner.

The company's operations continue to grow with the incorporation of innovative farming practices, creative engineering, and the cultivation of close family farming collaborations. As a result, Baloian Farms has grown its sourcing, storage and distribution operations throughout California and Mexico.

"We're forever changing," said Baloian. "We're always looking for new areas to grow our product and looking for new customers to service."

Even though Baloian Farms is a family-owned business, Baloian credits the other members of the company who come together and help make Baloian Farms what it is today. From those at the very top to those harvesting the crops, everyone is appreciated and loved as part of the family.

"Our strength is our people. That's what makes us good," said Baloian. "We have an amazing group of people that run this

company and they do a fantastic job."

The Baloian family also has a strong relationship with Christ. They credit how far the company has come to the Lord, stating, "The one constant has been our faith in God, knowing he is in control. God has been faithful to us. He may not have given us what we want, but he has always given us what we need. I give all the credit and glory to God."

Alex Light | Writer can be reached at: 490-3493 or e-mail alex@thebusinessjournal.com



2024 FOBA HONOREE — LARGE BUSINESS

DiBuduo & DeFendis Insurance Brokers, LLC: Legacy of Service



Photo contributed by DiBuduo & DeFendis | Matt and Mike DeFendis pose with a portrait of their father Leonard DeFendis.

Estela Anahi Jaramillo - STAFF WRITER

With more than 60 years of service to California, DiBuduo & DeFendis Insurance Brokers, LLC, has continued its commitment to family and family values. Founder Leonard DeFendis taught his family to treat customers and employees like family.

It was the way he and his partner, Anthony DiBuduo, ran D&D for decades, according to Matt and Mike DeFendis, the principles of D&D.

They grew up watching how clients and employees responded to that core value, how it was real and everlasting. It helped grow the company from its small

beginnings in 1960 to one of California's largest independent insurance agencies, which is why many of its staff members have 30-plus years of service.

DiBuduo & DeFendis is an honoree for The Business Journal's 2024 Family Owned Business Awards this year.

"Being considered for The Business Journal's Family Owned Business Awards is truly an honor, as we pride ourselves on the family foundation at the core of our brokerage," says Principal of DiBuduo & DeFendis Insurance Brokers, LLC, Matt DeFendis. "In business for nearly 65 years, it started with our father and our godfather building this brokerage on trust and relationships, and we plan to continue that as the legacy of the company lives on."

D&D is very active in supporting the communities they serve. With a strong focus

on education, children, and their Catholic faith, the DeFendis family and The D&D Project, an in-house company committee to make a community impact, have served their communities in countless ways, from generous financial contributions to volunteer efforts to hosting frequent blood drives and providing school supplies to needy children.

The company has more than doubled in size since Matt and Mike took over the firm after the passing of their father Leonard. D&D continues to expand to new areas throughout the state.

Estela Anahi Jaramillo | Writer can be reached at: 490-3448 or e-mail anahi@thebusinessjournal.com



2024 FOBA HONOREE – LARGE BUSINESS

Quality Home Services: Treating water and clients well



Photo by QHS | Joe Holstein is the second-generation president of Quality Home Services.

Estela Anahi Jaramillo - STAFF WRITER

In 1985, Bart Richey and Donna Holstein were moved to create a business that would fulfill the need for safe, clean water in the Central Valley. With only three employees, they began under the name of B & D Quality Water as an affiliate of RainSoft Water Treatment.

With time, they became one of the top 5 dealers nationwide. Today, Quality Home Services (QHS) has over 175 employees.

They have offices in Fresno, Bakersfield, and Castroville, California. They work with homeowners in the following California counties: Fresno, Madera,

Kings, Tulare, Kern, Mariposa, Merced, Monterey, San Luis, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Stanislaus and Stockton.

Quality Home Services is an honoree for The Business Journal's 2024 Family Owned Business Awards.

"It's exciting, we're honored, we're humbled by the recognition. I think the most exciting part of this is seeing our people's pride in it. They're excited, they're sharing with their families and friends—we all want to work somewhere we enjoy but also something that we feel proud of and are making a difference," said Joe Holstein, president of QHS.

QHS was founded over 30 years ago on the simple yet powerful

principle of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." As a second-generation, family-owned and operated business, QHS is passionate about improving the quality of life of its customers while also being environmentally responsible.

Joe and Jill Holstein have taken over the president and vice president roles, and the business has continued to grow and thrive.

In 1985, they had three employees, 200 RainSoft customers and revenue of \$400,000. In 2021, they had 175 employees, a total customer base of 45,000 servicing 11,000 customers last year alone, and revenue of over \$30 million.

Holstein said the growth came from

their dedicated and knowledgeable staff committed to providing the best customer service and quality workmanship. They also leverage the top manufacturers for each product line, providing the best products on the market.

OHS has multiple employees who have spent more than 30 years working for the company, showing their commitment to their customers and team. Holstein said the familial environment they have for the staff has played a hand in the company's growth.

Estela Anahi Jaramillo | Writer can be reached at: 490-3448 or e-mail anahi@thebusinessjournal.com

Gin | From 1

similar to a lime. Its oil is processed for use in foods, beauty products and essential oils.

Walheim has authored more than 30 gardening books, including three on citrus, was a staff writer for *Sunset Magazine* and is one of the senior editors of the last four editions of the *Sunset Western Garden Book*.

Originally from the Bay Area, Walheim moved to Exeter in 1990 to grow his citrus, and recently moved to Oregon about two years ago.

Around 2020, Walheim was on vacation in Atascadero when he came across Central Coast Distillery and met Olson. They found they both had a common love for citrus and started experimenting with the bergamot sour orange to come up with a gin.

Olson is a culinary school graduate, sharpening his chef skills during his travels through 27 countries. A highlight of his career was a four-year stint as executive chef of Ojai Valley Inn & Spa in Ventura County.

Walheim contracts Olson to make and bottle the gin, but Walheim credits creativity to helping them get to where they are today.

For over 35 years, Walheim grew specialty citrus crops, including bergamot, on 17 acres of land in Exeter. Walheim sold the farm about two years ago, but he still consults with the new owners and all the fruit for his gin comes from Walheim Ranch.

"Olson really made something that was a masterpiece," Walheim said. "Over the couple of years, we tried different formulas and came up with

something we are really happy with."

Walheim had been trying to make a bergamot gin for years, but no distillers he met were interested until he met Olson.

He said there are gins that do have dried bergamot rind or peel. Walheim Ranch Gin uses the fresh rind off the fruit in the neutral alcohol, along with juniper berries and other botanicals.

Over 35 years ago, him and fellow writing partners founded California Citrus Specialties, which aimed to help introduce and promote many new citrus varieties to chefs, gardeners, supermarkets and commercial growers.

California Citrus Specialties was dissolved several years ago following the death of friend and business partner Mike Foskett.

Walheim is intrigued by citrus because there are so many varieties — and so many possibilities for their use.

With the everchanging tastes of consumers, Walheim has noticed now, more than ever, that consumers are more willing to try something new.

"Quality has become more important over the years, and consumers want higher quality," Walheim said.

Walheim goes to local liquor stores to promote his product to businesses, but it can currently be found at the Sunnyside Liquor & IPA Hub, Rozi's Market and Liquor in Visalia, and several restaurants and bars including Yosemite Ranch, Westwoods BBQ, The Standard, Vintage Press in Visalia, La Piazza in Tulare, amongst others.

He has noticed that small batch spirits are becoming more popular,



Photos Contributed | Lance Walheim, owner of Walheim Ranch Gin, has authored over 30 gardening books, showing off bergamot oranges grown on 17 acres in Exeter.

especially for tequilas, whiskey, and gin, and there's more interest in distillery tours. Bartenders are also getting more creative and are wanting to dry different recipes with different spirits.

The gin is not only being carried and enjoyed locally, but also recognized for its unique quality.

Walheim's gin won a double gold medal and was also awarded Best Gin and Best in Class, in the International Women's Spirits Competition.

Overall, it received the second highest score among all the competitors. The International Women's Spirit Competition's judge panel consists of professional women winemakers, distillers, sommeliers, retail buyers,



Photos Contributed | Walheim Ranch Gin gets its unique and upfront citrus flavor from the fresh rind from the bergamot orange, a variety of citrus that is also known for its use in Earl Grey tea.

beverage industry educators and journalists.

Though he didn't have any prior experience making alcohol, he has learned a lot from Olson and began taking courses in Kentucky, but he will leave the real work to the master distiller.

They hope to expand and get the gin in more bars and restaurants, and with Atascadero's Central Coast Distillery moving into a bigger location soon, it could be very possible.

"It's been an exciting process for me," Walheim said. "It's something I've always wanted to do and to be able to pull together all the things involved, and getting a positive reaction from everyone is exciting."

FDA advisers urge targeting JN.1 strain in recipe for fall's COVID vaccines

BY LAURAN NEERGAARD AP MEDICAL WRITER

(AP) — Government advisers Wednesday said it's time to update the recipe for the COVID-19 vaccines Americans will receive in the fall -- targeting a version of the ever-evolving coronavirus called JN.1.

While COVID-19 cases currently are low, more surges are inevitable and manufacturers need time to brew shots for fall. Moderna, Pfizer and Novavax all have tested doses updated to match the JN.1 variant that became dominant last winter.

But just a few months later, numerous offshoots of JN.1 already are on the rise, prompting Moderna and Pfizer to also test a slightly different vaccine formula targeting what's now the most common U.S. subtype, called KP.2.

That made for a tough choice as the Food and Drug Administration decides the final recipe. FDA's advisers voted Wednesday that the next vaccine should come from the JN.1 "lineage" or family. Then FDA vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks challenged them to be more specific

about exactly which variant to target, wondering if KP.2 was a better option.

"If this evolves further in the fall, will we regret not having been a little bit closer?" Marks said, likening the choice to how he always picks the "freshest" milk with the longest expiration date in the grocery store.

But KP.2 isn't likely to still be the biggest threat by fall, the panel responded. Having to make the choice now, they preferred the parent JN.1 variant itself rather than trying to predict which of its descendants was most likely to increase in the coming months.

"Having a vaccine that's the trunk of the tree rather than the branches makes sense to me," because it would offer some cross-protection to other subvariants that emerge, said one adviser, Dr. Melinda Wharton of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Health officials have told Americans to expect a yearly update to COVID-19 vaccines, just like they get a new flu shot each fall designed to match as best as possible



Photo by Ed Us on unsplash.com | The government is recommending an update to the COVID-19 vaccine to target a version of the coronavirus called JN.1.

the currently spreading strains. Even though just about everyone has either been infected or had at least one round of COVID-19 vaccinations, the coronavirus keeps churning out new varieties that can dodge prior immunity -- and protection also wanes over time.

Last fall's COVID-19 vaccine targeted a completely different section of the coronavirus family tree, and CDC data shows only about 22.5% of adults and 14% of children received it. But even though public concern about COVID-19 has waned, it remains deadlier than the flu, according to a recent analysis of

Veterans Affairs hospitalizations this past winter.

Moderna, Pfizer and Novavax all said they could have supplies of JN.1-specific shots ready by fall, although they didn't provide amounts. Like it has in previous years, the CDC will make recommendations on who should receive updated shots and when.

— *The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Science and Educational Media Group. The AP is solely responsible for all content.*

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Demand for DIY Home Security is Growing and Xfinity is Offering New Products That Put Customers in Control

According to Omdia Tech Research, the rate of self-installed security systems has been steadily increasing since 2017, pointing to a need for a do-it-yourself option in today's home security market.

Responding to the increase in consumer demand, Xfinity announced two new do-it-yourself (DIY) security products – the Xfinity Door and Window Sensor and the Xfinity Motion Sensor – that are perfect for customers looking for customizable, DIY home monitoring products. The new sensors can be installed, activated, and connected over WiFi in minutes, and join Xfinity's extensive line of home monitoring products, including Indoor and Outdoor Cameras, Video Doorbell, and Smart Thermostat.

Xfinity's new sensors offer

customers the ability to customize their experience through the Xfinity app, where they can add and pair as many sensors as they need, turn monitoring on and off, and set rules for real-time alerts when doors and windows are opened or if motion is detected. The motion sensors can detect the difference between people and pets, meaning animals won't trigger a false warning. They complement Xfinity's Self Protection product, which allows customers to leverage sensors, cameras, and other smart home technology to keep an eye on and secure their home from wherever they are, all for just \$10 per month.

"Our customers have told us they're looking for a simple, affordable home security option that they can tailor to meet their unique home protection needs," said Emily Waldorf, Senior Vice President,

Consumer Internet Services, Comcast. "Xfinity's new sensors, coupled with our Self Protection service, can help people achieve peace of mind without breaking the bank."

Customers can purchase the new sensors by calling 1-800-Xfinity, by visiting their nearest Xfinity store or online at www.xfinity.com. As always, customers can purchase Self Protection service online, on the phone, or in store.

Xfinity customers looking for a total security solution can sign up for Xfinity's Pro Protection or Pro Protection Plus. Named #1 in Customer Satisfaction for professionally monitored home security systems by J.D. Power1, Pro Protection and Pro Protection Plus offer 24/7 professional monitoring and a personalized home security system starting at only \$30 a month.



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EDUCATION: MASTER'S IN LEGAL STUDIES (EMPHASIS IN BUSINESS), CERTIFICATE IN DIAMOND GRADING | AGE: 29 | FAMILY: WIFE AND TWO KIDS

Tell us about your history in the Central Valley.

I was born and raised in Fresno. My father grew up in Fresno as well, and he had already taken over Orloff Jewelers from his father by the time I was born. I attended Gibson Elementary school and Baird Middle School prior to transferring to Tenaya Middle School so I could play football. From there, I went to Bullard High School, where I played football and served as the All-Student Body President. I left Fresno to attend the University of Arizona, and then to pursue my master's degree in legal studies. After several years of work experience in the jewelry industry, my wife and I moved home with our son so I could join my father in our family business. Since then, we've settled back into our hometown and are excited to raise our son and his newborn sister in the city we were raised in.

How did you get into the jewelry business?

Well, being born/raised in the jewelry industry was quite infectious. My family has been in the industry for many years. I grew up in a jewelry store, listening to my father talk to buyers, watching my mother design our holiday displays and seeing beautiful and intricate pieces up close from a very young age. As a kid, I was particularly fascinated with watchmaking and the history of fine timepieces. I particularly remember spending endless days in the store, looking through catalogues from different watchmakers and researching watches from different regions.

How has the store evolved in your time there?

Orloff Jewelers has been a part of the Fresno community for decades. We continue to grow and expand in our community presence, recently becoming the official timekeepers of Fresno State Athletics, which has been a great honor. We've also been able to bring in luxury brands that the Central Valley has never had access to prior, which elevates the industry and expands our customer base. At the same time as we have increased our luxury offerings, we've also done so with the amount and quality of more financially accessible lines as well, which has grown our customer base significantly. I will add, though this is not a recent development, that we feel fortunate to have the ability to support organizations that better our community — both financially and through service.

What does it mean to Orloff Jewelers to be a family business?

There is nothing more important to me than family — both as it relates to my personal values and our business. I believe that family businesses have an intention that can't be replicated in larger businesses. Our family's business is as much about being community-facing as it is sales. I believe that we are only as strong as those around us, and wish to continue to grow Orloff Jewelers alongside the Fresno community.

What was your biggest failure and what did you learn from it?

Several years ago, I made a business decision that did not turn out well for me. My decision was made in sort of a vacuum because I did not want to ask for guidance or help despite having people who offered both. I wanted to prove to others (and to myself) that I could handle this situation on my own. Despite it being difficult to resolve, I learned that I should never be too proud to ask for help. There will always be others who have perspectives and experiences that can help me, and I am grateful for opportunities that provide me with guidance and support.

What do you consider to be your biggest success and how have you tried to replicate it?

Creating and building eBay's Authenticity Guarantee Program in the U.S., U.K., and Germany was a process I am very proud of. It required a very different approach than other projects I've worked on, and a great deal of collaboration and partnership. I think that my experience with multi-layered programs and learning how to deliver a quality of service to indirect buyers has translated into my current goals and the way I hope to continue to progress in my profession.

What cause/organization is close to your heart?

My family has been involved with Exceptional Parents Unlimited (EPU) for many years. EPU aims to provide services to parents of children with a range of special needs and challenges, and currently serves over 4,000 families in the community. Parents can access resources, seek guidance, and receive the help they need to strengthen their family, and help their children grow and succeed as much as possible. We are proud to support EPU's mission and grateful for its positive impact on our community.

What was the best advice you ever received?

Every day, before I left for school, my father would tell me: "do your best, try your hardest, learn lots, & have fun." He would send them to me via text throughout college, and still says them to me often. The advice seems simple, but it remains in my head and guides choices I make each day. I now feel blessed to get to share these same words with my children.

What was your very first job and what did you learn from it?

My first job was at a small restaurant, and it taught me a great deal. Most importantly, I learned how I want to treat others, and the value of connecting with a person. I will never know the kind of day someone is having, so it's my responsibility to treat them with respect and kindness as much as possible.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

Well, my wife and I just welcomed our second child, so free time is a bit limited. I feel so lucky for the time I do get to spend with my children, my wife, and our two dogs. We love to get outside whenever possible. My son just turned two years old, so watching him play and experience new things is the best.

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CITY

The Clovis City Council unanimously confirmed **Briana Parra** as the new Clovis

City Clerk during Monday's regularly scheduled meeting. Parra has served several local

agencies as an Assistant, Deputy, or Interim Clerk since 2006 and has



Parra

overseen multiple local elections throughout her career. Most recently, she served as the Assistant City Clerk of the City of Fresno. Parra has achieved the "Certified Municipal Clerk" designation from the International Institute of Municipal Clerks, which represents a significant commitment to the profession through education and experience, and she also holds a bachelor's degree in leadership and organizational studies from Fresno Pacific University.

REAL ESTATE

ReMax Commercial Real Estate welcomes **Maria Ramirez**. Ramirez, a bilingual professional, brings a wealth of experience from her time with a top five nationally ranked commercial team. She is well-versed in the latest technology and has a keen eye for identifying great deals.



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Toledo

new additions to the team: **Maria Toledo** is joining the team as a residential salesperson for the Kingsburg office. **Ritik Narula** is joining the team as a residential salesperson for the Clovis office. **Tess Blengino**,



Blengino



Narula



Farmer

the team as a residential salesperson for the Clovis office. **Michelle Zurn**, formerly of DeYoung-RLA, is joining the team as a residential

formerly of Wells & Bennett, is joining the team as a residential salesperson for the Clovis office. **Holly Farmer**, formerly of Bratton Real Estate, is joining



Zurn



Perez

salesperson for the Madera office. **Mina Perez**, formerly of Exit Realty, is joining the team as a residential salesperson for the Merced office. **Patricia Guerra**, is joining the team as a residential salesperson for the Hanford office.



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Security and Alarm Companies

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	Name of company Address	Phone Fax	# Employees, Full Time	Accounts	Local offices Company- wide offices	Products/Services	Specialties	Headquarters	Year founded locally	Top local executive
1 (1)	AmeriGuard Security Services, Inc. 5470 W. Spruce Ave., Ste. 102 Fresno, 93722	559-271-5984 559-271-5984	450 ¹	WND	1 3	Private armed/unarmed Security and Patrol Officers, Security Cameras & Alarm Installations, 24/7 monitoring and alarm response.	Security guards, vehicle patrols, security camera/alarm installations. 24-hour monitoring, armed response	Las Vegas	2000	Lawrence Garcia, president/CEO
2 (2)	Geil Enterprises, Inc. ² 1945 N. Helm Ave., Ste. 102 Fresno, 93727	559-495-3000 559-485-5380	300	WND	1 2	Guard service, including on-site & mobile patrol, alarm installation, monitoring, service and repair	An employee-owned company with security guard and alarm services serving the Central Valley for 35+ years	Fresno	1986	Roy Hernandez, President
3 (NR)	Sebastian 7600 N. Palm Ave. Fresno, 93711	559-432-5800 559-432-5858	135 ³	WND	2 4	Electrical, low voltage, underground contractor, IT, security, communications provider	Electrical, underground, low voltage contractor, telecom, traffic signals and managed IT services	Fresno	1946	William Barcus, CEO
4 (4)	Fresno County Private Security 1195 W Shaw Ave, STE B Fresno, 93711	559-233-9800 559-221-9803	120	85	1 1	Uniformed armed/unarmed patrol services, alarm response, standing security services, site security surveys	Shopping centers, industrial complexes, construction sites, agriculture, HOA/residential, special events	Fresno	2002	Melissa Pacheco Marquez, general manager, Robert Simpson, owner
5 (6)	Haven's Security Inc. 459 N. Blackstone Ave. Fresno, 93701	559-432-7600 WND	42	WND	1 2	Keys, locks, safes, access control, installation of safe service, locksmith supply	Keys, master keying, high security keys, safe sales & services, access control, automotive keys.	Fresno	1976	Andy Peltier, owner
6 (4)	Falcon Private Security, Inc. 3594 E. Ventura Ave Fresno, 93702	559-226-1990 559-226-1980	WND	WND	2 2	Security guard & patrol services	Armed and unarmed security officers, 24-hour alarm response	Fresno	2004	Michael B. Safwat, CEO
7 (5)	AAA Security Inc. 321 Noble Ave Farmersville, 93223	559-594-5600 WND	WND	WND	2 2	Security and patrol services	WND	Farmersville	1974	Andre Galston, division manager
8 (7)	Zaks Security One 1906 Howard Rd. Madera, 93637	559-673-1010 559-673-4898	WND	WND	1 1	Security, armed security patrols, private investigation.	Homeland Security Level IV certified, government contracting, trained in handling mental health patients	Madera	1985	Issa Zacharia, owner
9 (8)	Westcom Systems, Inc. 4704 W. Jennifer Ave., Ste. 108 Fresno, 93722	559-222-1100 559-271-7170	WND	WND	1 1	Fire and burglar alarm monitoring, surveillance systems, access control, design and consulting	Same	Fresno	2005	Harry A. Massucco, Jr., president
(NR)	Sonitrol of Fresno 4220 W. Figarden Drive Ste. 104 Fresno, 93722	559-264-5924 559-435-5927	WND	WND	1 8	Commercial and residential	Intrusion detection, access control, video surveillance, fire alarm and detection, testing & more	Fresno	1986	Monica Urzua, Operations Manager

WND-Would Not Disclose. NR-Not Ranked. All data has been provided by representatives of the businesses listed and The Business Journal research. Not all sources responded to inquiries.

Researcher: Alex Light
Publication Date: June 7, 2024
Email: alex@thebusinessjournal.com

¹ Based on data submitted for Minority-Owned Businesses List

² Geil Enterprises, Inc. does business as both CIS Security and Valley Security & Alarm. The data has been consolidated.

³ Based on data submitted for Women-Owned Businesses List

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Ruiz Food to close Tulare manufacturing plant



Google Street View photo | The closure of the Ruiz Foods Tulare plant will impact 215 employees.

Ruiz Foods announced plans to close its Tulare manufacturing facility last week after 20 years of operations.

There will be 215 employees impacted by the closure, reported The Sun Gazette, with some employees given the opportunity to transfer to the frozen Mexican food manufacturer's Dinuba plant.

The plant at 4002 K St. originally opened in 2004 as an extension of the Dinuba facility and was intended for additional short-term capacity. Ruiz Foods officials determined it was too small and required substantial investment "to remain a viable part of the Ruiz Foods network," according to a statement.

The plant is expected to close at the end of the company's fiscal year, between Aug. 30 and Sept. 13.

With more than 4,000 team members, Ruiz Foods has five manufacturing facilities in California, Texas and South Carolina. It announced the relocation of its headquarters from Dinuba to Texas about a year ago.

Marjaree Mason Center taking top ten professional women nominations

Nominations for the 41st annual Top Ten Professional Women & Leading Business Awards are now open through the end of the month.

Hosted by the Marjaree Mason Center, the awards, which are held annually in October, highlight the achievements and commitment of local women who have gone above and beyond in their professions and enriched the lives of others.

The program will recognize ten individuals and one business.

Last year's winners included some well-known community leaders including ABC30/KFSN-TV News Anchor/Reporter Graciela Moreno and Reedley City Manager Nicole Zieba, as well as representatives from the Fresno Police Department, local nonprofit organizations and more.

Nominations for the award will be accepted from now until Thursday, June 27 at 5 p.m. Nomination applications can be found at the Marjaree Mason Center website.

Equity firm acquires wheelchair maker with Fresno HQ

Platinum Equity announced the signing of a definitive agreement to acquire Sunrise Medical from Nordic Capital.

Financial terms were not disclosed. The acquisition is expected to be completed in Q3 2024, subject to customary regulatory approvals.

Headquartered in Malsch, Germany, and with North American headquarters in Fresno, Sunrise Medical has manufacturing facilities in the United States, Mexico, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, and China.

Platinum Equity's European investment team, based in London, is leading the acquisition.

Sunrise Medical is a global market leader for assistive mobility solutions. It is active in the development, design, manufacturing, and distribution of assistive mobility products and solutions such as manual and power wheelchairs, power assist products, pediatric and geriatric therapeutic devices, mobility scooters, seating and positioning systems, daily living aids, and other home medical equipment.

Sunrise Medical's products are marketed under the Quickie, RGK, Magic, JAY, Zippie, Leckey, Breezy, Sterling, and other proprietary brands. They are sold through a network of homecare medical product dealers or distributors in over 130 countries.

Thomas Babacan, President and CEO of Sunrise Medical, will continue leading the company after it transitions to new ownership.

JP Morgan is serving as Platinum Equity's financial advisor on the acquisition of Sunrise Medical. Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP is providing legal counsel, and Latham & Watkins LLP is providing regulatory counsel.

Kashian Foundation grant to help students look sharp

A one-time grant of \$35,000 has been gifted to the Foundation for Fresno Unified Schools from the Kashian Family Foundation. A portion of the grant will be used to expand the annual suit drive and Suited for Success shopping event.

This year, the Foundation for Fresno Unified Schools collected 5,000 items

of clothing, significantly surpassing last year's total of 2,000 items. Juniors and seniors were able to shop for free at the first Suited for Success event at McLane High School.

The remaining clothing items were distributed to clothes closets in all FUSD high schools.

The rest of the grant will provide scholarships for five graduating seniors who are part of Fresno Unified's Project ACCESS. Project ACCESS provides support to foster and homeless youth to help them to become college and career-ready graduates. The funds will help support these students in taking the next steps in their educational journey.

Late last year, the Kashian family donated \$5 million to support medical education at UC Merced. They have supported the campus since its earliest days, and their gift to the university will help advance medical education efforts.

Fresno City College president hired as West hills Chancellor

The West Hills Community College District (WHCCD) announced that Fresno City President Robert Pimentel will be the new chancellor starting Aug. 1.

He will succeed Dr. Kristin Clark upon her retirement at the end of July. Clark served at West Hills as the Lemoore College president for nearly six year and the past three as the District's chancellor.

Pimentel's experience brings a wealth of knowledge in higher education and a deep commitment to student success, according to a West Hills news release.

A Valley native, Pimentel has dedicated his career to serving the Central Valley community. For the past two years, he has served as the president of Fresno City College, the largest community college in the region. Before this role, he served as the same institution's vice president of educational services and institutional effectiveness.

Before joining Fresno City College, Pimentel spent nearly 18 years with the West Hills Community College District, working in various capacities at both campuses and the district office.

Pimentel will officially assume the role of chancellor on Aug. 1, leaving the State Center Community College District (SCCCD) to identify an interim president for Fresno City College. The SCCC board will then oversee the national search for the next president.

City of Fresno's wage theft program receives \$750K grant

The City of Fresno has been awarded a grant to help battle wage theft.

City Attorney Andrew Janz announced his office was awarded a one year \$720,000 Worker's Rights Enforcement Grant from the California Labor Commissioner's office, enacting the city's prosecution of wage theft.

This grant for Fresno is one of the largest grants awarded in the state, even larger than that of the City of San Francisco.

Fresno's Wage Protection Program is a city-led initiative aiming to combat and prevent wage theft to ensure that workers in the city receive the compensation they are legally owed.

Led by Councilmember Tyler Maxwell and the City Attorney's Office, the program combines education for both workers and businesses, policy advocacy, and enforcement to address and rectify instances of wage theft across various industries in Fresno. The wage theft program will launch with its website on August 1, allowing community members to file complaints. The attorney's office will also launch an informational workshop for workers at the end of July.

This February, Fresno became the first city in the state to take on wage theft cases under state law.

Fresno City Council voted unanimously to authorize city attorney Andrew Janz to establish a dedicated division in his office focused on prosecuting wage theft cases.

National labor law firm sets up 55th office in Fresno

Ogletree Deakins, one of the largest labor and employment law firms representing management, will be opening its 55th office in Fresno.

This will be the seventh firm in the state for the company, with James D. Miller from local law firm RAIMONDO | MILLER serving as the office's managing shareholder.

Additional founding members of the office include shareholders Ryan Porte and Kevin Piercy, and associates Timothy Hastie and Taylor Ealand, all from RAIMONDO | MILLER.

Miller is a seasoned trial attorney with a legal career spanning 25 years, focusing on employment litigation, including class and representative actions and traditional labor. Additionally, the Fresno native has experience in the agriculture and dairy industry, both on the farmer/grower side and farm labor contracting defense.

Porte, who served as an officer in the United States Army, has a practice focusing on counseling and defending employers in class and representative actions and single plaintiff employment disputes.

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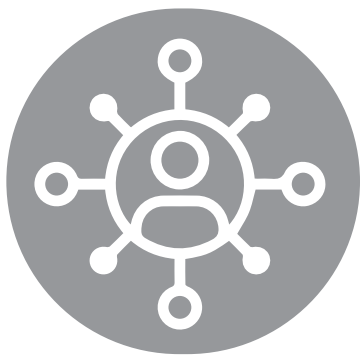
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Rich Pedroncelli, AP Photo | Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin of Thousand Oaks talks to colleagues before the start of the Assembly session in 2014.

The Legislature's top expert on tech is taking on the industry

Ryan Sabalow - CALMATTERS

Democratic Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin, a former tech insider, is taking on the industry with a far-reaching bill that would require artificial intelligence developers to disclose what data they use to “train” their systems.

“Consumer confidence in AI systems has not grown at the same rapid pace as industry adoption,” Irwin said at a hearing last month. “Many consumers have valid questions about how these AI systems and services are created.”

The concern from Irwin about AI is notable since she may be the Legislature's top expert on the tech industry and, occasionally, its champion.

As a young engineer at Johns Hopkins University's applied physics lab, she was assigned to troubleshoot launches of the U.S. Navy's Trident II nuclear missiles — making her the Legislature's only actual rocket scientist.

She's a former engineer for Teledyne Technologies, a global aerospace and tech conglomerate headquartered in Irwin's hometown of Thousand Oaks.

She co-chairs the California Legislative Technology and Innovation Caucus and a national legislative task force on AI, cybersecurity and privacy.

She also has been a favorite of Big Tech, once authoring legislation that critics accused of weakening California's digital privacy protections on behalf of the tech industry to which she had close family ties. At the time, her husband was the chief operating officer of Amazon-owned Ring.

The prominent lobbying group TechNet in 2017 declared her “Legislator of the Year.”

But now TechNet and nearly every other lobbying group representing major tech companies oppose her latest legislation, Assembly Bill 2013. The influential California Chamber of Commerce is also opposed to the bill, which the state Assembly voted 56-8 to move to the Senate recently.

In April, the Chamber's Ronak Daylami told the Assembly Privacy and Consumer Protection Committee, on which Irwin sits, that Irwin's bill could expose tech firms' carefully guarded trade secrets.

“While it may not be obvious on its face,” Daylami said, “the expertise and judgment, as well as the actual selection of data and datasets chosen to train a specific AI model, is itself proprietary.”

Would disclosure fend off AI bias?

But Irwin said her bill would give consumers a powerful tool to better understand the emerging technology, which has raised privacy alarms after it was revealed that tech firms used facial recognition, social media posts and copyrighted material such as artwork and news articles to train their artificial intelligence software.

Irwin said the requirement to disclose training data could also help ward against potential biases in the AI software's decision making.

She said the issue piqued her interest at a recent meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures where she heard a doctors' group discuss using AI in dispensing medication. The problem, she said, was that it wasn't clear whether such systems had inherent biases since the companies aren't required to disclose the data they used to train their systems.

She wondered: What if it was like a clinical drug trial that only tested the medication on white suburban men, instead of a diverse group of patients whose bodies might react differently?

“With these AI medical devices, you really should know what is the group that it was trained on,” she said.

Putting it more broadly, Hayley Tsukayama, a legislative advocate for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, likened the disclosure requirements to being able to read a list of ingredients that go into a meal.

“The ingredients list is occasionally much easier to parse than trying to taste

a dish at the end and trying to figure out what's in it,” she said.

Irwin owns Amazon and tech stocks

The AI disclosure bill is hardly Irwin's first foray into regulating tech since she joined the Assembly in 2014.

Her office provided what it called a “non-exhaustive” list of 13 other tech and cybersecurity bills Irwin has authored, most of which passed. Some of them were also opposed by the tech industry, which has donated at least \$288,000 to her campaigns over the years, according to the Digital Democracy database.

Since 2015, Irwin's votes have aligned with TechNet's position on bills 28% of the time, according to a Digital Democracy analysis.

Her most controversial tech legislation, though, was a 2019 bill that critics said would have weakened the state's landmark California Consumer Privacy Act. The law gives Californians legal authority to order tech companies to tell them what personal information they have collected, and customers can tell the companies to delete it and not to sell it.

At the time, Irwin's husband, Jon, was the chief operating officer of Amazon-owned Ring, raising the appearance of a conflict of interest given the Privacy Act regulated the company.

Irwin insisted there wasn't one. She told Politico at the time it was offensive to assume she was working on behalf of her husband's company, given her professional background and expertise.

Jon Irwin has since left Amazon to become COO of CENTEGIX, a tech company that makes wearable emergency alert devices and security systems for schools and other institutions, according to his LinkedIn page.

The Assemblymember reported to state ethics officials last year the family sold Amazon stock, valued at between \$300,000 to \$3 million. State ethics officials allow lawmakers to report wide

ranges of their stock portfolio value when they file their annual financial disclosure statements.

Irwin's disclosure filings show she also acquired at least \$60,000 in cryptocurrency, AI and semiconductor investments last year.

In her interview recently with CalMatters, Irwin declined to provide a more precise figure for the Amazon stock sales or address her other recent investments in tech. She said she complied with the state's ethics disclosure requirements, and that her and her husband's investments don't factor into her decision-making process.

“I make every decision based on what's best for my constituents,” she said. “I don't need anybody questioning anything that I do, so we are always very careful about every decision.”

Rather, she said she became interested in tech and cybersecurity legislation because her background made her a natural fit for it. And she's even made it a point to educate her fellow legislators on cybersecurity.

“You can talk to any of my colleagues; most of them, I've grabbed their phones and told them, ‘Oh, my God, you know, your phone is tracking you; these apps are tracking you. Let's turn off location devices and do a two-step authentication,’” she said. “In caucus, I get up and tell people how to make their phones more secure.”

Tsukayama, the legislative advocate for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said Irwin definitely knows complicated tech issues as well or better than anyone in the Legislature, even if the digital consumer rights group sometimes opposes her legislation.

“We haven't always agreed with her,” Tsukayama said, “but it's rarely, you know, over her misunderstanding how the technology works.”

CalMatters economy reporter Levi Sumagaysay and data reporter Jeremia Kimelman contributed to this story.

the People on the Move | From 16

ARCHITECTS

Teter, Inc. announced that the California Architects Board has granted **Tyler Dinis, Megan Armendariz, PE, and Ellie Duran**



Dinis



Armendariz

the official title of a licensed professional Architect. Dinis excels at translating clients' visions into reality by skillfully integrating the physical and virtual realms. He employs innovative design concepts to craft detailed 3D models for a comprehensive and visually compelling representation. Dinis received a Bachelor of Architecture (minoring in

Construction Management) from NewSchool of Architecture and Design. Amendariz is a licensed Professional Engineer and Architect. She brings a unique perspective and expertise from both architectural and engineering disciplines to the project team. She earned a Master of Science in Structural Engineering from Stanford University and a Bachelor of Science in Civil & Environmental Engineering from California State University, Fresno. Duran has almost two decades of



Duran

experience in architecture, her portfolio encompasses diverse project types. She possesses a comprehensive knowledge of the design process from inception to design, construction, and closeout. Duran has a Bachelor of Architecture from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

FUNDRAISERS

Tachi Palace Casino Resort hosted the 21st Annual Charity Golf Tournament on Monday, April 29th at Lemoore Golf Course benefitting Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Kings County. 160 golfers participated, consisting of local and non-local California



Tachi Palace

Native American Casino representatives and casino vendors. Tachi Palace Casino Resort raised \$37,201.16 for CASA of Kings County through their charity golf tournament.

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GUEST VIEW
By Dan Walters |
CalMatters Commentary

California homelessness funding is on the chopping block. Will it make the final budget?

It's the billion-dollar question. That's how much cities and other local governments have been receiving from the state each year to deal with California's ever-increasing population of homeless people. But after five years, will the aid from Sacramento continue as Gov. Gavin Newsom and legislative leaders try to close a massive state budget deficit? Newsom has been critical of local homelessness efforts and his newly revised 2024-25 budget not only pulls back an extra \$260 million that local officials had counted on receiving this year, based on meeting specific goals. The proposal doesn't include anything for another year. "I know that may not sit well with some," Newsom said as he released the revision last month, "but we're struggling with seeing the performance I want to see on the streets." Last week, legislative leaders released their own version of the budget. Pointedly, it includes \$1 billion to continue the grants to

local agencies for a sixth year. Local officials, particularly those from major cities where homelessness is most evident, are doing what they can to have the \$1 billion included in the final budget that Newsom and legislative leaders must pass by next week. "We cannot abandon this progress now," said San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria, chair of the California Big City Mayors coalition, as he and other mayors issued a public plea. Without it, Gloria said, "the progress that we were making will vanish," citing consequences of closing shelters and other programs financed by the grant program. "In short, it will be a disaster." While Gloria cites "the progress that we are making," Newsom has repeatedly chided local officials for not making more progress. Since he became governor in 2019, the official count of homeless people in California has risen from 151,000 to 181,000 despite state expenditures of at least \$25 billion, including the local grants. But who is truly responsible for having spent so much money for so little progress? In April, State Auditor Grant

Parks issued a report that was highly critical of the California Interagency Council on Homelessness (Cal ICH), composed of Newsom administration appointees, for failing to track how the billions of dollars have been spent. Noting that his office had warned about a "lack of coordination among the state's homeless programs" three years earlier, the April report said the agency had tracked spending for two years, but "has not continued to track and report on this information since that time." Moreover, Parks said, "it has not aligned its action plan for addressing homelessness with its statutory goals nor has it ensured that it collects accurate, complete and comparable financial and outcome information from homelessness programs. Until Cal ICH takes these critical steps, the state will lack up-to-date information that it can use to make data-driven policy decisions on how to effectively reduce homelessness." While running for governor in 2018, as the homeless crisis was becoming evident, Newsom promised to appoint a "homelessness czar" who

would shake up the bureaucracy and focus on reducing the number of unhoused Californians. Two years later, during a news conference, reporters pressed him about his campaign pledge. Visibly irritated, Newsom pounded the podium and snapped, "You want to know who's the homeless czar? I'm the homeless czar in the state of California." With the state's evident failure to markedly shrink the numbers despite spending many billions of dollars, it would appear that Newsom, the self-appointed czar, wants to shift the blame. As it stands, were he to leave the governorship two years hence with homelessness still growing, it likely would tarnish whatever next political venture he envisions.

CalMatters is a public interest journalism venture committed to explaining how California's state Capitol works and why it matters. For more stories by Dan Walters, go to CalMatters.org/commentary.

Small businesses challenge ban on noncompetes



NFIB filed an amicus brief in the case *ATS Tree Services, LLC v. Federal Trade Commission (FTC)* at the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. This case challenges the FTC's final rule banning noncompete agreements. NFIB opposed the FTC's final rule issued in April 2024.

"This rule is as superfluous as it is detrimental for small businesses," said Beth Milito, Executive Director of NFIB's Small Business Legal Center. "The FTC significantly underreported the impact this regulation will have on small businesses nationwide, while failing to provide any substantial reasoning for the necessity of this arbitrary mandate."

The brief makes two main arguments: 1) the FTC premised the final rule on a seriously flawed cost-benefit analysis, and 2) the FTC's fallacious and internally inconsistent "reasoning" establishes that the rule is arbitrary and capricious.

NFIB filed the brief with the National Retail Federation, International Franchise Association,

Associated Builders and Contractors, American Hotel & Lodging Association, National Association of Wholesale Distributors, Independent Electrical Contractors Consumer Technology Association, the Home Care Association, the Restaurant Law Center, and U.S. Council for International Business.

The NFIB Small Business Legal Center protects the rights of small business owners in the nation's courts. NFIB is currently active in more than 40 cases in federal and state courts across the country and in the U.S. Supreme Court.

The National Federation of Independent Business is the voice of small business, advocating on behalf of America's small and independent business owners, both in Washington, D.C., and in all 50 state capitals. NFIB is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and member-driven. Since its founding in 1943, NFIB has been exclusively dedicated to small and independent businesses, and remains so today.

WEB POLL

Should hedge funds be banned from purchasing, acquiring, leasing, or holding a controlling interest in agricultural land?

Sen. Melissa Hurtado (D-Hanford) introduced Senate Bill 1153, which would ban hedge funds from owning a controlling interest in farmland. According to Hurtado, it addresses "the rampant farmland purchasing by private equity firms and hedge funds driving up the speculative prices of available farming land through acquisition practices that may be in violation of federal anti-trust laws." It did not pass out of the suspense file for this legislative session. A majority (65%) of respondents to this week's web poll think hedge funds should be restricted in such a way. Another 33% said no to a ban and 2% were unsure. Sixty-four votes were cast.



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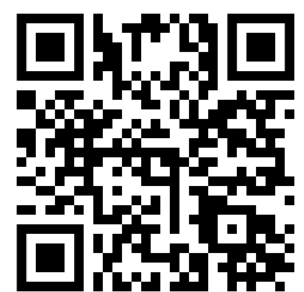
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