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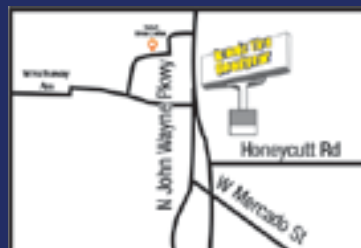
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ON THE COVER

James Huerta, a firefighter with 19 years of service with the Maricopa Fire Department, was photographed by Victor Moreno at Don Pearce Fire Station No. 575.

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A brush with Maricopa fame

TALK ABOUT A JUXTAPOSITION.

Victor Moreno, a photographer who sometimes lends his expertise to us here at InMaricopa, was out at Don Pearce Fire Station on Edison Drive shooting photos of James Huerta for the cover of this month's magazine.



And while he shot Huerta, I was taking pictures of Victor.

Victor has captured so many images of what matters in Maricopa both for our magazine and other entities.

He is the guy who photographs everyone and here I am taking pictures of him.

It truly was an inception moment.

In this month's issue, we have stories about both, who are as close as it gets to famous in Maricopa. Through their work, albeit in vastly different fields, both men have touched many lives in Maricopa.

The story on Huerta is remarkable in that here's a 64-year-old man keeping up with and oftentimes surpassing the efforts of men and women a third his age. This guy might be the closest thing Maricopa has to a superhero.

But all superheroes have their weaknesses. For a few weeks in 2020, it seemed Huerta may have found his kryptonite with a COVID-19 infection.

The man who makes everything seem effortless struggled to recover.

Speaking of overcoming struggles, Amalia Clark, the owner of Molly's House of Little Feet, has an interesting story we tell about the 10-year journey to opening her preschool on Porter Road.

Tom Schuman took some time to talk with Clark about how she made her

dream a reality.

Growth, commercial and otherwise, is a complex topic in Maricopa. Jay Taylor takes a look at how residential growth has to occur before commercial growth can follow. It seems you can't have one without the other.

And as part of our monthly InFocus segment, we speak with City Manager Rick Horst about jobs, growth and how we may have some unexpected allies in the drive to improve State Route 347.

These are just a few of the features in this month's issue.

Enjoy, and thanks for reading!

JUSTIN GRIFFIN | EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

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CONTRIBUTORS



C. JON BEECROFT

Dr. Beecroft, a doctor with Maricopa Foot and Ankle, takes the time to discuss the efforts involved in making sure patients have a positive experience at his practice.



JOAN KOCZOR

Joan Koczor, an advocate for seniors, writes this month about Women's History Month. She played an instrumental role in securing a senior center in town.



TOM SCHUMAN

After a break for the holidays, Tom makes a return to the pages of InMaricopa with a story about the determination of a local daycare owner to move forward.



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Blast from the past

In Maricopa, shops and storefronts have come and gone over the past few decades. In the black-and-white photo from the 1960s, you can see the Maricopa Shopping Center North. On the left are Kimball's Drug Store, Maricopa Mercantile and a beauty shop. On the right are Headquarters Buffet and Restaurant, Woods Apartments and the water tank. Only Headquarters remains.

2022



THIS MONTH BACK IN...

For these and other historical stories, visit InMaricopa.com.



2005

The Maricopa City Council discussed the donation of 20 acres from El Dorado Holdings, with a right-of-first refusal for an additional 10 acres, to be used as the future City Hall at the southeast corner of Bowlin and Porter roads. But the government building would eventually be built nearby, at Bowlin and White and Parker Road. Groundbreaking on the project was in April 2012 and the 45,000-square-foot building opened in September 2013.



2008

Former Assistant City Manager Rick Buss filed a notice of claim against the City, Mayor Kelly Anderson and City Manager Kevin Evans for \$5.8 million in damages based on allegations of breach of contract. Buss had left the City in 2007 with a severance agreement stating neither party could disparage the other. Near the time of his resignation, however, the City allegedly told a reporter an internal investigation into his conduct was forwarded to Arizona Department of Public Safety. Buss later chose not to proceed with a lawsuit.



2015

For the second year in a row, the city of Maricopa won Mix 96.9's "Battle of the Burbs" radio contest. The contest had 32 suburban communities in the Phoenix region competing competing for votes in a tournament-style bracket. Maricopa beat Surprise, Queen Creek and Casa Grande to advance to the final four, where it knocked off Mesa, the largest city in the competition with 10 times the population of Maricopa. Anthem led most of the championship round, but Maricopa residents rallied late to take the title of "Best Suburb in the Valley."

Maricopa Historical Society; Brian Petersheim Jr.

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in Focus

As Maricopa grows, city manager says high-paying jobs will follow

BY JUSTIN GRIFFIN

MARICOPA FINDS ITSELF IN AN interesting place these days. With housing running short in the Phoenix metro area, the growing city seems to be one of the few places in the area where land is still available to be developed.

City Manager Rick Horst recently offered his thoughts on growth and what it is going to take for the city of Maricopa to see long-term success.

Maricopa is an attractive option for many reasons, Horst explained.

"We have the resources, including water supply," he said. "Our values for homes, although growing, are still significantly lower than the Greater Phoenix area."

A few months ago, Horst met with a group of real estate and development advisers, who

pointed out there is really nowhere else to go in the Valley.

"From Buckeye, all the way to Queen Creek, all the land that's available has already been purchased and is being prepared for development. So, there's very little actual land left," Horst said. "There is no place to go but here or the Buckeye area, out that way or further north. But when you talk about proximity to downtown Phoenix and the airport, and those type of things, where all the high-tech jobs are in the corridors and Chandler and everywhere else, we're it."

Horst said more homes means more voters in Maricopa and down the line, with the need for workers in neighboring areas, the city will get more attention from the state legislature and local county governments.

"And that's why the 347 problem will get resolved, because now Maricopa County needs us to resolve it as much as we need to resolve it," Horst said. "Before it was 'Maricopa is not even in our county.' But now, they need our workers to get there."

"And if (employees) have a tough time getting there, (employers) will have a hard time supplying their manpower needs, so it works both ways."

Which leads to the question of jobs in Maricopa, another cure for the SR347 woes city residents face daily, Horst pointed out. "With more jobs created here, fewer people need to go on 347."

While service jobs in Maricopa are already plentiful, there is a need to diversify through high-tech opportunities that pay more.

Bryan Mordt



City Manager Rick Horst speaks about jobs and growth. At right, crews work on the John Wayne Parkway beatification project, an effort by the city to put its best foot forward to visitors and prospective citizens.



“We are not going to build the roads to accommodate 120,000 people today ... Because if we did, we would have to rely on our current tax base to pay for it, which means raising everyone's taxes, which nobody wants.”

RICK HORST, CITY MANAGER

Getting in the game

Maricopa was only fully incorporated in 2003. In many ways, other cities had a head start.

"Some of our sister cities have been working on programs for 50, 60 years, such as the new Lucid plant (in Casa Grande) and other things, because they worked on creating industrial sites and other opportunities over the decades," Horst said.

"We're 18 years old," he continued. "And probably for the first 10 years, this is somewhat of a guess, we were just content to be a bedroom community. And then the next five years, we were kind of content to be a bedroom community, but we've recognized we needed something more."

More importantly, without good-paying jobs, any community stagnates. But the price of housing rarely stalls, especially in an area close to so many employment opportunities.

"For the last three or four years, it's been about the realization that we can't just be a bedroom community," Horst said. "Because bedroom communities cannot thrive, and survive, unless you want to be a Park City (Utah) or Vail, Colorado, where taxes are

Bryan Mordt; Brian Petersheim Jr.

through the roof. The average home price there is a couple of million dollars."

To keep that from happening, Horst said Maricopa leaders have been actively pursuing high-paying jobs. He described them as "high-tech, research and development, and scientific" in nature.

"We've been involved with the Greater Phoenix Economic Council and the Arizona Commerce Association for years, paying our dues and we never got invited to the dance, meaning when they got leads, we never came away with anything, partly because we weren't ready for them," Horst said. "But now we're starting to get leads."

"And now, not only are we invited to the dance, but we're also actually in the spotlight."

The city is currently working with six to eight entities to bring jobs to Maricopa — all opportunities with potentially sizable job creation. To win one or two of them would make a difference, he said.

"We may not win all of them," Horst said. "But the more you have working, the better chance of success."

The challenges ahead

There's a perception transportation is the biggest roadblock to Maricopa landing commercial and industrial plants and facilities, but Horst said there are exterior factors to consider.

Arizona municipalities compete against states that provide more incentives. The state does not offer tax increment financing, or TIF, which subsidizes companies by refunding or diverting a portion of their taxes to help finance development in an area or a project site.

"That's always been an impediment for us," Horst said.

And another obstacle in Maricopa is the fear of the unknown.

"I think the biggest challenge of growth is that it scares people," the city manager said. "They don't know what it means. They don't know what that looks like."

Population projections are also intimidating for some. The city has enough housing permits available to triple its population. But it's not going to happen overnight. It will take decades.

The growth is going to be gradual, Horst said. It must be.

"It's really about planning, and I was asked,

‘How are you going to get ready for the next 60,000 people? What are you going to do?’ Horst said. “Well, the same thing we did for the first 60,000 people. We are not going to build roads to accommodate 120,000 people today.

“Because if we did, we would have to rely on our current tax base to pay for it, which means raising everyone’s taxes, which nobody wants. And we are committed not to do it. Matter of fact, we’ve lowered our taxes for the last two years and planning to for the third year, both primary and secondary taxes.”

In addition to lowering taxes, Horst said the city is looking to expand the tax base with more jobs.

In the drive to lure more lucrative jobs to Maricopa, there are going to be wins and losses. But Horst feels the city is getting ready to turn the corner.

“We probably won’t win most of them, but we’re likely going to win one or two of them. And then once you start winning one or two of them, the question becomes, ‘Why do they pick Maricopa?’

“And so that’s where we’re at. We spend a



The widening of Porter Road represents one of the many projects within Maricopa that will continue as its population grows.

YouTube

View the interview here:



lot of time and energy telling people that we are here to create jobs. Again,

these are intended to be high-paying, clean industry, smart city-type, growth jobs. We are not interested in the old industrial park-type

concepts and frankly, they do not exist that much anymore anyway. We want to do things that add to the community and build the community up.”

Expansion of health facilities in Maricopa will be another source of good-paying jobs. In December, the city’s first hospital, Exceptional Health, opened. Another hospital is slated to open within the next year.

“That created 80 or 90 new jobs in the medical field,” Horst said. “We already have about 1,600 people here, medically trained in our community. Now, they have jobs getting paid just as well, but staying here.”

Striking a balance

Jobs aside, the evidence of growth is visible throughout the city in road construction alone. The city continues its John Wayne Parkway beautification project, along with improvements elsewhere.

“People complain about the construction on our streets,” Horst said. “And my answer is: Can you imagine if we weren’t fixing the streets? Do you want a few months of inconvenience, or do you want a lifetime of inconvenience?”

Getting people to stay in Maricopa is one of Horst’s goals. He noted city residents spend about \$400 million annually in other cities and towns that collect the sales taxes.

“So, all we want to say, we don’t want you to spend any more money, just spend it here, instead of there,” he said. “Their answer is: ‘We’ll be happy to do it as soon as you give us the stuff to do it.’

“And we’re moving in that direction.”

Brian Petersheim Jr.

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MPD improves way it reports crime

BY CHIEF JAMES HUGHES

THE MARICOPA POLICE DEPARTMENT has officially improved the way we report crime. We recently completed the transition from the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program's traditional Summary Reporting System (SRS) to the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS).

Since 1935, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has used UCR to report and categorize crime in our country. SRS focused on eight index crimes known as Part 1 offenses. It is safe to say crime and the mission of law enforcement has changed since UCR's

inception in 1935.

I am excited by our transition to NIBRS, which will provide more comprehensive data and benefit both the public and the police department.

When used to its maximum potential, NIBRS identifies, with accuracy, where and when crime occurs, the crime type and the characteristics of its victims and offenders. I believe transparency is a cornerstone in public trust. It is imperative the citizens trust the data they receive regarding crime in their community.

NIBRS provides greater specificity to our crime data, collecting information on 52 crimes known as Group A offenses, compared to the 10 crimes collected by SRS, which only counts the most severe crimes. This has always been a concern with SRS since many criminal incidents involve multiple crimes committed by the suspect or suspects. NIBRS can establish many more crime components as well as the relationships and associations among these components.

Moreover, NIBRS is better aligned with police departments that have implemented community policing strategies. SRS reports

two types of crime — crimes against persons and crimes against property — to establish the crime reporting baseline offenses. NIBRS not only incorporates crimes against persons and property but collects data on a third category — crimes against society. These crimes against society are often the crimes and offenses that degrade a community and serve as a starting point for more serious crime.


The transition to NIBRS was mandated by the FBI. Crime data submitted in the SRS format was no longer accepted as of Jan. 1, 2021. All city and county agencies will continue to submit their data directly to their respective state agency, which reviews the data and forwards the crime statistics to the FBI. The submission process will remain the same and is done through electronic submission.

Maricopa Police Department had planned to have transitioned to NIBRS over a year ago, but the complexity of parsing the reporting data required a system upgrade of our records management system. MPD responds to over 17,000 calls for service a year and completes more than 25,000 police-related activities when traffic enforcement and other proactive data are included.

Our Records Unit acts as the quality control entity of NIBRS. They are responsible for checking each crime or offense. Data points such as incident date and time, relationships of victims to offenders and crimes, demographic specifics, location data and many other details by our officers must be properly coded. This process is critical to ensure the data we are reporting to NIBRS is accurate.

How will NIBRS affect Maricopa? It won't. All the additional data points collected by NIBRS have been collected by MPD over the last decade. Our department utilizes a data-driven philosophy to deploy police resources.

Our department has a crime analyst who prepares daily, weekly and monthly reports using over 100 separate data points and prepares reports for our officers and police supervisors. The only difference with the transition to NIBRS will be what is reported in the FBI's annual crime index. NIBRS will have no impact on the police services provided to our community.

Although the transition to NIBRS was time consuming for our administrative staff, I welcome any change that improves the accurate reporting of crime statistics to our community. Law enforcement continues to be a profession that is experiencing a lot of positive change. NIBRS is another example. 



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Catalyst

Residential growth spurs commercial activity

BY JAY TAYLOR

AS REAL ESTATE GROWTH continues in Maricopa, increased commercial activity isn't far behind.

Just how that growth will happen can be attributed to the City's General Plan, which was approved by voters a couple of years ago. It guides the development of residential areas, along with the commercial space.

Rodolfo Lopez, the City's director of development services, said the plan helps to create cohesion between the two types of land uses.

"The General Plan designates private and public land with diverse land uses that foster growth in the Maricopa economy while integrating these land uses with neighborhoods accessible to jobs, shopping, amenities, and recreation," Lopez said.

To the casual observer, it may appear the housing construction boom is overtaking the commercial side of Maricopa's economy.

A popular sentiment among some residents is there is not enough commercial development

to accompany all those housing projects. Residents are hungry for trendy, new restaurants and big-box stores.

But do these perceptions equal reality?

Currently, Maricopa's existing land-use designations reserve more than 22 million square feet for commercial development.

That means 11,892 single-family homes of 1,850 square feet, the median home size in Maricopa, according to Realtor.com, could be built in that same amount of space.

Using the latest figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, the estimated population within the city limits is 62,000, with about 6,000 new residents moving in each year.

Currently, there are 1,675 improved lots in the city — lots that Lopez described as "there is a street in front of it." Assuming 2.6 residents per home, those improved lots will bring another 4,355 citizens to the city once built out, taking the city past 67,000.

Beyond that, within the current city limits, Lopez said there are another 42,209 dwelling units that have been approved by the

city in some fashion and are in one stage of development or another.

That brings the total future population of Maricopa to 177,109 if no other projects are approved.

But the City estimates it will only need a total of 9 million square feet of commercial space to accommodate all those future residents. That's right, Maricopa already has more than twice the commercial space allocated it will need to serve a population of almost triple what it is today.

Residential growth is key to commercial growth

Properly zoned land is available for new business in Maricopa, but for commercial growth to happen, there has to be a local population to support it.

City Manager Rick Horst has often professed the philosophy that "retail follows rooftops."

Lopez noted while the city may have control over where residential and commercial areas lie, developers ultimately decide which projects to pursue.

Brian Petersheim Jr.

"We provide information and opportunities within the city as far as what's zoned and what is not zoned, and we will be supportive, but it's all driven by the market itself," he said.

A good example of what Lopez was talking about is the growth occurring in the vicinity of the Shops at the Wells, which includes Walmart and 14 other shops.

"We've been seeing activity here because (the area of) Porter Road and Maricopa-Casa Grande Highway has a large amount of population," Lopez said.

That area is a hub for development these days. Much of it — more than 1,000 units — is planned as multi-family housing, a segment City officials have repeatedly said is lacking if it wants to attract more businesses and jobs.

Those multi-family units will provide more-affordable housing for entry-level workers, young teachers, firefighters and police officers. With the average cost of a home in Maricopa now at \$374,000, according to Realtor.com, many of those workers are effectively locked out of the market to buy. The huge rise in home sales prices the past several years has helped create a market for apartments and single-family homes built specifically to rent.

Eight projects — with 2,313 total units — are currently in development in the area to help address those needs. The units would house more than 5,700 people — all within about one square mile of the Shops at The Wells, which includes 15 different retail businesses.

"What we're seeing here is creating a lot of activity, and this type of population we hope is going to get this area to develop a lot faster from a retail component, seeing that it's walkable, high-density around that area," Lopez said.

Eastside growth on deck

One area where commercial development is lagging is residential growth is around Tortosa on the city's east side. Lopez said growth evident in other parts of the city isn't happening there yet.

"We're not seeing commercial come out there very quickly because the market demand says that retail out there may not be successful ... because there's just not enough population out there yet," he said, adding he doesn't believe commercial growth is far off.

Lopez pointed to retail potential at several commercial corners in Tortosa and the surrounding area, including Sorrento and Rancho Mirage.

"We're seeing a lot of activity in the Tortosa community that could help these commercial corners come into play, he said. "Again, the




market will determine that, but what's great is that we're building the population out there that can create the demand."

Just west of those communities lies an area Horst and other city leaders have touted as a future hub for development of all kinds — the City Center area around City Hall and the library.

At the 2022 Future Planning Meeting in January, Horst said 11 square miles of land can be developed there as soon as the Federal Emergency Management Agency approves a

city flood mitigation plan to remove the area from the flood plain.

Lopez said the residential growth in the areas east of the John Wayne Parkway will later play into the development of City Center.

"That's what we've seen happening," Lopez said. "We've seen that on Porter Road. Because of the amount of traffic that's out there now, we're seeing a lot more retail activity in that area. We'll need all of that because the broad vision for City Center is for retail, residential, open space — a true mixed-use environment." 

BY THE NUMBERS

22,000,000

Commercial square footage available

9,000,000

Commercial square footage needed to support Maricopa's population tripled

2,313

Housing units proposed by eight projects in the vicinity of the Maricopa-Casa Grande Highway and Porter Road intersection

475

Single-family homes for sale at Kelly Ranches

414

Apartments for rent at Sterling at Stonegate

318

Townhomes for sale at Villas at Stonegate

309

Apartments at Copa Flats

285

Units at Roers Maricopa Apartments

197

Units in to-be-named development

194

Townhomes for sale or under construction at REV@Porter

121

Single-family homes for sale at Stonegate

Source: City of Maricopa



Children are all smiles while participating in educational activities at Molly's House of Little Feet.

Little feet, big mission

Daycare opens after overcoming major obstacles

BY TOM SCHUMAN

THE JOURNEY TO OPEN MOLLY'S House of Little Feet was a long one.

It started in 2011, when owner Amalia Clark quit a job in banking to pursue her calling in childcare. She started by caring for children in her home, four at a time.

Over time, she worked diligently — through many challenges and the pandemic — to realize her dream of opening a full-service daycare facility.

"It was amazing to be able to open our doors and welcome families in," Clark recalled about the long-awaited opening date on Aug. 31. "It was overwhelming but exciting. This is what I worked so hard for."

Molly's House cares for 80 children, infants through 5-year-olds, some on a part-time basis. The children enjoy hot meals, care from a

talented and dedicated staff, and instruction and guidance to prepare them for elementary school.

It's a long way from the days of caring for four children in her home. There have been many struggles along the way for Clark.

Working toward a dream

In 2010, Clark and her family moved to Maricopa and by April of the next year, she'd changed careers and started caring for children.

The waitlist grew as she could only care for four children at home, according to state regulations. Her first attempt at a standalone facility turned into a series of frustrations. She purchased a mobile home and made what she thought were the necessary renovations to open her business.

"I turned the paperwork into the city, but that's not what the city thought," she said. "There

were troubles with a new computer system, so they only had some of my paperwork. I ended up having to shut down. We were running at full speed. I thought we were on the road to success.

"By the time they let me know everything I needed to do, the mobile home I had was not going to be a mobile home anymore," she continued. "I tried to build on that land, start from scratch. It was going to be over a million dollars and the bank said no. So, we scrapped that deal."

Clark returned to in-home childcare but kept pursuing a new site. She signed the paperwork in February 2020 for the facility on Porter Road, bordering the Santa Rosa Springs community. It was formerly a special-needs preschool. But COVID soon arrived, and the work required at the building presented its own set of challenges.

Bryan Mordt

"I really want to get my children running into those kindergarten doors, not just with their education but with their behaviors, their manners, knowing how to say 'please,' 'thank you,' talking with their teachers and being respectful."

AMALIA CLARK, OWNER

There were plumbing and electrical issues. The desire for a kitchen — to supply what Clark says is, at times, the only hot meal some children might receive in a day — meant additional changes.

"There were a lot of times I thought about throwing in the towel," Clark admitted. The stress points, during this time, "were more on the financial side. We had already done everything we could do financially, so every time the contractor would come back and say, 'We've run into this issue, or we have that issue,' I would say I am going to just sell this place, make a little bit of money and do it that way.

"But looking at my kids and my grandkids and knowing that I had people waiting for me, that were rooting me on, there was no choice in quitting," said Clark, adding she would get back up, dust herself off and keep moving along.

"At the end of the day, this was something I wanted to do. I'm not a quitter."

Samantha Cochran, assistant director of the facility, has been with Clark six years.

"She went through a lot," she said. "I'm so glad (Molly's House) finally happened."

A focus on family

Family plays a major role in Clark's vision and determination.

She is the oldest of 12 children, with 10 living in the Phoenix area. Her father worked in the Army as a helicopter mechanic before becoming an entrepreneur with pool businesses in California and Arizona. Today, six of Clark's brothers own and work in a separate Valley pool operation.

There is also a long history of military



service, including Clark's husband and two of their four sons. One of many special events at Molly's House since its opening was a free pancake social on Veterans Day. Another was a Thanksgiving feast for the community.

"The military holds a real dear place in my heart," Clark said. "At Thanksgiving, we wanted to provide a safe place, a warm place for people to have a meal, talk, meet new friends. I remember that my dad worked really hard to put that meal on the table for us."

Today, family extends to the young people and their parents who rely on Clark.

"When doing this building, the biggest thing was building that gap between a 'facility feel' and a 'family feel.' When you walk in, I want you to smell pancakes, smell eggs, smell sausage, and feel like you are at home," she

Amalia Clark, owner of Molly's House of Little Feet, makes a batch of grilled cheese sandwiches for the kids in her fully functional and up-to-code kitchen.

"Molly" in the title "Molly's House of Little Feet" is short for the owner's first name, Amalia.



The facilities at Molly's House of Little Feet include nearly 3,000 square feet of play space.

emphasized. “They’re not just going to daycare; they’re going to their second home. Teachers are like co-parents.”

Catherine Burkhardt has experienced that family feeling with both of her sons — the oldest now in elementary school and the second at Molly’s House.

“What sold me on Molly’s in the first place was that preschool education with the home environment. When my oldest went to kindergarten,” she recalled, “his teacher thanked me for the knowledge he had. That was all Molly.”

But it goes beyond education.

“Molly knows the families, she knows the siblings, the parents, the grandparents,” Burkhardt added. “They are not just another child to her. I know they are getting that warm, loving relationship while I’m at work.”

Learning for the future

With a waiting list already in place, there are plans to expand.

The benefits, Clark said, will be bigger classrooms for current children and the addition of before- and after-school programs.

Bryan Mordt

“I like structured chaos. Implementing a preschool environment wasn’t very hard,” she said. “I really want to get my children running into those kindergarten doors, not just with their education but with their behaviors, their manners, knowing how to say please, thank you, talking with their teachers and being respectful.”

Isabel Quezada works with pre-K children at Molly’s House. Starting this year, she’s been working with 2-year-olds. Each day is better than the previous, she said.

“I love being able to teach the kids their letters and numbers and having them go home and tell their friends what they learned,” Quezada said. “I’ve learned better techniques on how to teach each individual age.”

Both Quezada and Cochran cite the extended patience that comes with the role and the caring environment.

“I come from a big family,” said Cochran, a lifelong Maricopa resident. “I love the kids and watching them grow.”

And while Clark is thrilled with her current staff, she knows many will eventually move on. As she works to mentor them, she offered, “Won’t it be nice to put someone who has the work ethic, manners and common sense out into the workforce and help add to it?”

Don’t ever give up

So, was the extended journey to create Molly’s House and the exhausting days as a childcare provider worth the struggle? The answer comes as Clark happily high-fives her pre-K students as they line up and exit their classroom to go wash their hands. It’s undoubtedly just one sign of many that takes place during a typical day.

Clark said her story can be an example for others.

“Sometimes, we have a dream, but we too easily allow outside things to push us down instead of fighting or talking or communicating or trying to find, ‘OK, what else can we do?’ A lot of times it is thinking outside the box to make these dreams come true,” she said.

“For anybody, this can happen. You just have to keep getting back up. Don’t quit so easily. Don’t let the one thing that gets in your way (end your dream).”

Burkhardt, for one, is glad Clark worked so diligently to make her dream come true.

“I wasn’t going anywhere,” she said. “I told her if she had closed her doors, I would have had to quit my job because I didn’t trust my kids with anyone else.”

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GETTING TO know

NATALLIE STEVENS

Owner, AZ Natural Brows

Hometown: Salvador, Brazil

Residence: Glennville

Maricopan since: 2019

Family: Husband Justin and baby Lincoln

Hobbies: Outdoors with family and dogs!

Dream vacation: Bali, Indonesia

Like most about Maricopa: Friendly community

FAVORITE ...

Movie: “Eat, Pray, Love”

Song: “I am Woman” by Emmy Meli

Musician: Chad Smith

Drink: Rosé wine

Meal: If I have rice and beans I am happy, LOL

Restaurant: Plaza Bonita

Getaway: Somewhere with a beach

Quote: “What you think, you become. What you feel, you attract. What you imagine, you create.” -Buddha

Words to live by: Be grateful ALWAYS!

Joke: When people think that permanent makeup is equal to tattoos or doesn’t look natural.

Photographer important part of high school graduations

BY JUSTIN GRIFFIN



Victor Moreno talks to a subject during a recent photo session.



VICTOR MORENO HAS SHOT dozens of covers for *InMaricopa*, magazine but in terms of volume, the magazine photos are a small percentage of his work.

He shoots photos at all kinds of community happenings. Sometimes, the City hires him for events; other times he's capturing events on his own time. When people see Victor coming their way with a camera, they know it's time to smile. He shares photos on his Facebook page.

But in early 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Maricopans the hardest, there weren't many people smiling.

The pandemic struck in the spring months and some people started losing jobs. As a result, suddenly out-of-work parents were calling Victor to cancel or postpone their children's planned graduation portraits.

"They were telling me that they couldn't afford it because the husband lost his job and

the wife was the only one working, or vice versa," Victor said.

Graduating high school is a special time for kids everywhere. That year was disappointing for many, as the annual commencement at Ram Stadium would be canceled, with graduates picking up their diplomas in a drive-thru ceremony. And then the cap-and-gown photos treasured by parents were in jeopardy for some.

In many ways, the portraits represent the final chapter of childhood for these kids and their parents.

Victor wanted to help. He wanted to make a difference in these family's lives.

"I felt bad for them," Victor said.

Inspiration came from Linette Caroselli, a local teacher. She sponsored the first graduate, paying for the photos of a graduate whose family couldn't afford them in tough times, and showed Victor how he could move forward in a way that helped everyone.

"She called me and asked me, 'May I sponsor a kid?'" Victor recalled. "She told me that there was a family she cared for and they didn't have a way to pay for it, but she wanted to give them that as a gift."

A good deed blossoms

Hoping to restore some semblance of normalcy for graduates and their families, Victor found a way to get the community involved — to ensure more families were able to get portraits.

First, he cut his photography rates by half, and then he followed up by asking local businesses to sponsor more kids.

And while the program started two years ago was intended to help families who had run into a rough patch during the pandemic, it has blossomed into something much bigger.

In 2020, Victor and local businesses put 65 kids through his lens that likely would have gone without professional portraits. Last year, the number was 98. And this year it will exceed 100. He still does the work at a 50% discount, and local businesses and individuals pay the balance. For example, this year, Global Water will sponsor five graduates.

But now his efforts have moved beyond

a needs-based program. It's become a way of people in the community doing something nice for their neighbors.

Some benefactors sponsor a graduate or two matching interests they had in high school.

"I have one person who wanted to sponsor a student who participated in band,"

Victor said. "I got in touch with the guidance counselor at the high school and we found a student who fit."

Some business owners use the arrangement as an opportunity to thank employees. If they have a worker whose son or daughter is graduating, they will sponsor the student.

In other cases, the portraits are paid for by a friend of the graduate's family.

Custom photo sessions

While these photo shoots normally are about an hour long, there's a lot of work behind the scenes. The effort begins weeks before the first photo is taken.

Victor learns about the students and tries to conceptualize a photoshoot that fits. Then, after

identifying a location and theme, he organizes the time and location of the shoot.

To watch Victor work is to see an artist in his element. He takes time to talk to the graduates and form a rapport with them. He makes these graduates, and basically anyone else who steps in front of his camera, feel like a million dollars. It's their day in the spotlight.

It's important, he explained.

"I will talk to them about their college plans or whatever they're planning to do after graduation. I want them to feel comfortable," Victor said. "I want them to look relaxed in their photos."

Following the actual shoot, there's work to do processing the photos. And later, he catches up with the parents and delivers the photos.

This year, his annual project kicked off in the first week of February. He works long hours to get most of the shots done before the graduation ceremony.

Until then, there is no such thing as a free weekend for Victor.

And he wouldn't have it any other way.



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Justin Griffin; Victor Moreno

Business, development around town

New, premanufactured metal bleachers will be installed at **Sequoia Pathway's** expanded athletic fields with Willmeng Construction doing the work at a cost of \$140,000.

The former Aaron's Furniture store at Maricopa Groves, 44565 W. Edison Road, will undergo tenant improvements of \$800,000 for use as a **Sherwin-Williams** paint store. Aaron's Maricopa LLC owns the property.

Omni Self Storage will build six commercial buildings at 18000 N. Stonegate Road: an 8,546-square-foot self-storage building at a cost of \$534,262; a 5,596-square-foot self-storage building with outdoor RV storage at a cost of \$350,085; an office and manager's quarters of 2,892 square feet at a cost of \$178,301; a storage building of 7,996 square feet at a cost of \$500,229; and a 70,466-square-foot RV storage facility at a cost of \$5.6 million. All work will be completed by James A. Campbell Construction Inc.



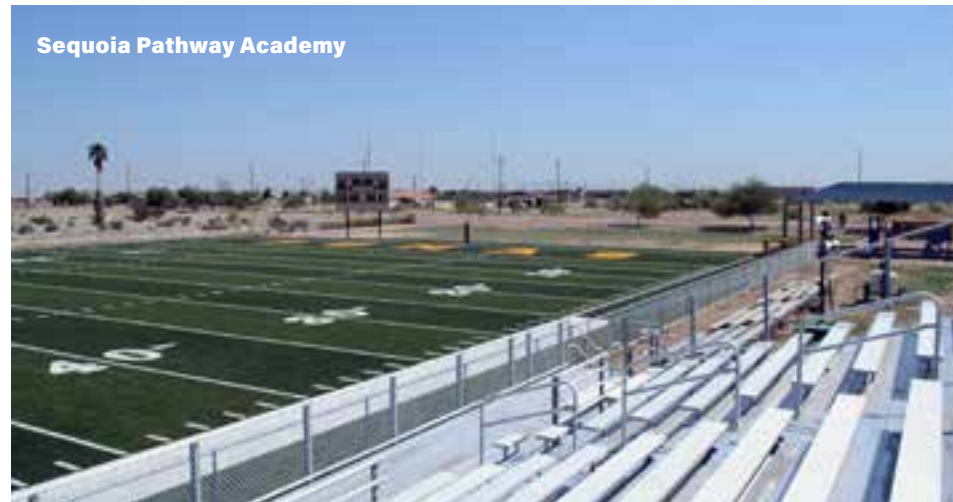
APEX Motor Club will build a 3,925-square-foot auto storage facility for \$378,000 at 22408 N. Ralston Road. It will also build four garage condominium buildings at a cost of \$1.18 million. All construction will be done by John D. Hensler LLC.

La Casa Dulce LLC will build a \$500,000 clubhouse facility at **Bungalows on Bowlin**, 44900 W. Bowlin Road for owner Desert Cedars Equities East LLC.

REV@Porter will build a \$814,325 clubhouse building at 17805 N. Porter Road. Sodella Construction Inc. will do the work.

Wynn Nail Salon, a new business at 20350 N. John Wayne Pkwy., Suite 120, is undergoing tenant improvements to an existing, vacant, landlord suite. There is no exterior work in the renovation.

ATL Wings restaurant will receive administrative zoning compliance following tenant improvements at a 1,258-square-foot



Sequoia Pathway Academy

space in Maricopa Towne Plaza, 19975 N. John Wayne Pkwy. The owner is Triple B AZ LLC.

Zoning compliance has been granted to **Jimmy John's** for its location in a new shell building in Sonoran Creek Marketplace at 20320 N. John Wayne Pkwy.

CVS Pharmacy at 44274 W. Smith-Enke Road will spend \$75,000 to remodel its 1,200-square-foot pharmacy area. Rancho El Dorado Pinal County AZ CVS owns the facility and Diamond Contractors Inc. will do the work.

McDonald's in Maricopa Fiesta, 20700 N. John Wayne Parkway, will undergo a \$200,000 renovation of the restaurant. The property is owned by McDonald's Real Estate Company with work to be completed by RWB Construction and Development LLC.

Heritage Point Garage will spend \$113,628 to build a detached structure at 45115 W. Garvey Ave. Maricopa Heritage Pointe LLC will have the work done by Rick Mosier Contracting.

Volkswagen of America will spend \$150,000 to upgrade the mechanical and

electrical elements of the HVAC system at its proving ground, 17169 N. Murphy Road. Trane US Inc. will do the work.

At 42020 W. Maricopa-Casa Grande Highway, **Fast and Friendly Car Wash** will build a \$1.8 million, 5,383-square-foot car wash at Maricopa Power Center at The Wells.

The **Community Park & Pavilion** at Tortosa, 19220 N. Diego Way, will build 2,516-square-foot clubhouse at a cost of \$363,184. The work will be done by AR Mays Construction Inc.

L'Image Beauty Salon at 41640 W. Smith-Enke Road will make \$110,000 of tenant improvements to its suite at Maricopa Grand Professional Village. Torrez Unltd Construction LLC will do the work.

Supercuts Hair Salon will make \$100,000 in tenant improvements at its new shop in Sonoran Creek Marketplace, Suite 130, 20350 N. John Wayne Pkwy.

Arizona Law Dawgs will spend \$10,000 on a commercial alteration to a building in Maricopa Manor, 19950 N. John Wayne Pkwy.



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BUSINESS



A summary of the Jan. 11-Feb. 9
food inspections by Pinal County
Environmental Health Services



Time/Temperature Control for Safety Food, Hot and Cold Holding
Internal temperature of sliced roast beef held in the upright warmer was 116-120°F. Required temperature: ≥135°F.

Time/Temperature Control for Safety Food, Hot and Cold Holding
Internal temperatures of cut lettuce and tomatoes, sliced roast beef, mayonnaise and cheese held in the smaller prep unit were 46-49°F. Required temperature: ≤41°F.

Separation-Storage
Open bag of sanitizer stored on food-prep sink next to heads of lettuce. Store chemicals away from food.

Cooling, Heating, and Holding Capacities-Equipment
Ice forming in upper and lower compartments of prep cooler. Cold foods must be kept at ≤41°F.



Food Temperature Measuring Devices
Food probe thermometer missing.



Preventing Contamination from Hands
Cook used bare hands in direct contact with onion garnish.

Using a Handwashing Sink-Operation and Maintenance
In-use serving bowls held in cook-line hand-wash sink. Hand sinks are restricted to handwashing only.

Time/Temperature Control for Safety Food, Hot and Cold Holding
Internal temperature of cooked rice held overnight in a separate bowl inside the rice warmer was 118°F. Required temperature: ≥135°F.

Equipment, Food-Contact Surfaces, Nonfood-Contact Surfaces, and Utensils
Build-up of debris on non-food contact surfaces/handles and doors of prep coolers and upright reach-in coolers.



Certified Food Protection Manager
No employees with Certified Food Manager card.

Time/Temperature Control for Safety Food, Hot and Cold Holding
Internal temperatures of milk-based pesto sauce held on ice pack at pizza boxing station were 59-65°F. Required temperature: ≤41°F.



Sanitizers, Criteria-Chemicals
In-use chlorine-based sanitizer in the three-compartment sink tested to be at least 200 ppm. Required: 50-100 ppm.

Sanitizing Solutions, Testing Devices
Testing strips for chlorine-based sanitizer not present.



Preventing Contamination from Hands
Employee used bare hands with corn dogs.

Good Repair and Proper Adjustment-Equipment
Gaskets on stacked freezers damaged. Door plate on walk-in cooler damaged.

Floors, Walls and Ceilings-Cleanability
Floor seams in front of the grill damaged.

EXCELLENT

- Bashas'
- Cilantro's Mexican Cocina
- Jersey Mike's Subs
- KFC/Long John Silver's
- Papa Murphy's Pizza
- QuickTrip
- QuickTrip Kitchen

- Raceway Bar and Grill
- Say Sushi
- Starbucks Maricopa Station
- Subway
- Water and Ice

SATISFACTORY

- Arby's
- La Quinta Inn and Suites
- Li's Garden
- Little Caesars Pizza
- MOD Pizza
- Rosati's Pizza
- Sonic Drive-In

EXCELLENT No violations found.
SATISFACTORY Violations corrected during inspection.
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT Critical items noted during inspection cannot be corrected immediately requiring follow-up inspection.
UNACCEPTABLE Gross, unsanitary conditions necessitating the discontinuation of service.

Source: Pinal County

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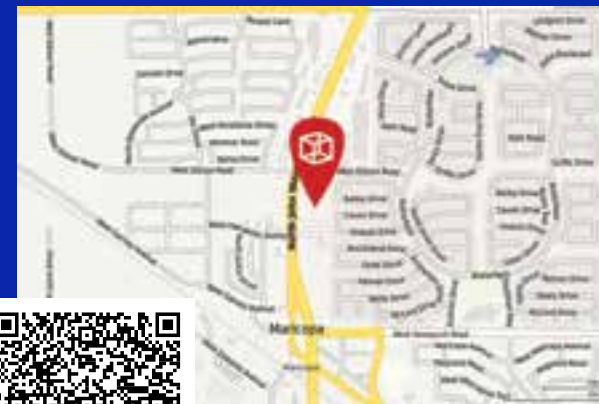
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Fungal nail infection treatment

BY KRISTINA DONNAY, FNP-C

MANY PEOPLE DEVELOP A FUNGAL nail infection at some point in their life. It's typically not serious but can be unpleasant and very difficult to treat.

Fungal-infected nails develop slowly and cause the nail to become discolored, thickened, and distorted. The medical name for a fungal nail infection is onychomycosis. Don't cover up your nails with polish or closed toe shoes, there are various treatments options to eliminate the fungus.

Signs and symptoms of a fungal nail infection:

At the early stages a fungal infection may not be obvious. As it progresses the infection can cause:

1. Discoloration of the nail. It may turn white, black, yellow, or green.
2. Thickening or distortion of the nail, the nail may become an unusual shape or texture and be difficult to trim.
3. It may lead to pain or discomfort, particularly when using or placing pressure on the affected toe or finger.
4. Brittle or crumbly nails. Pieces of your nail may break off or come away completely.
5. Foul odor, debris may build up underneath the nail causing an unpleasant odor.



The infection can spread to other nails on the hands or foot compounding the problem. In some instances, it may spread to the nearby skin.

Causes and risk factors of nail fungus infections

While fungal nails can be embarrassing, it doesn't mean you have bad hygiene. Anyone can develop nail fungus. The root cause is exposure to a fungal organism that usually enters the nail through a crack in the nail or a cut in the nearby skin. Yeast and molds can also cause nail infections. You may also acquire a fungal nail infection if you share clippers with someone else.

Certain factors can increase your risk of developing a nail fungus.

- Sweating heavily
- Having a history of athlete's foot
- Walking barefoot in damp communal areas, such as swimming pools, gyms, and shower rooms.

- Having a minor nail or skin injury
- Weakened immune system or having a chronic disease
- Wearing tight shoes with a narrow toe box

Common treatment options for toenail fungus

Fungal nails are notoriously difficult to treat with home remedies alone. Many people resort to antifungal tablets or antifungal nail paints. These typically will need to be administered over several months.

Here at Maricopa Wellness Center we offer the Aerolase Neo laser to treat fungal infections.

Clinical research has shown that the Neo laser is capable of effectively superheating the skin tissue beneath the finger and toenails, causing the coagulation of the soft tissue that is contaminated with fungal material. This can result in a significant cosmetic enhancement for patients in as little as one treatment. Treatment of nails with the Neo laser is fast, convenient, and comfortable. Most treatments can be done in as little as 10 minutes. The Neo laser is also highly effective in treating warts, spider veins, and other conditions of the foot and ankle.

Call today to schedule a consultation and get back into open toed shoes.

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Look to Sun Life Health for award-winning maternal care



SELECTING THE RIGHT OBSTETRICIAN early on in your pregnancy can make a huge difference in your health and that of your newborn.

Fortunately, finding that connection in Pinal County is easier than you might think.

Sun Life Health, a medical group with roots in Pinal County and the East Valley, has five doctors specializing in obstetrics, including Dr. Jonathan Willms; Dr. Susan Stein; Dr. Ryan Schmidt; Dr. Pavel Petkov and Dr. Logan Walter, who all have a combined 53 years of experience.

Those five are the doctors on call at the maternity center at Banner Casa Grande Medical Center, which was recently recognized by *Newsweek* as one of the nation's premier maternity hospitals.

Newsweek partnered with The Leapfrog Group, a national nonprofit organization that reports on the safety and quality performance of U.S. health care facilities, to highlight the Best Maternity Hospitals of 2021.

To earn recognition from *Newsweek*, several benchmarks had to be met. An important one is the rate of primary C-sections versus vaginal births. Most hospitals aim to keep the rate of primary C-sections at 25 percent. To be considered for the award, the rate had to be less than 23.9 percent. The rate for Sun Life Health is 12 percent.

Willms, who serves as the Chief Medical Officer and Director of Obstetrics and

Gynecology for Sun Life, said that avoiding C-sections is the healthier way to go for the mother.

"Once you've had that first c-section, most of the time you're going to end up with a c-section next time," Willms said. "And with each additional c-section, there are higher risks such as increased risk of infection or damage to the bladder or the intestines."

Four years ago, Willms was instrumental in helping to elevate the care of infants in Casa Grande. Under his watch, the facility attained and maintained approval to operate a level 2 neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), which means that the facility can care for infants 32 weeks and older. Most community hospitals have a Level 1 NICU, which means they can only care for infants 36 weeks and older.

"It's a real achievement that a hospital of this size has a level 2 NICU," Willms said. "There aren't a lot of community hospitals out there with that ability. It has to be a relief for parents to not have to drive 40 minutes to spend time with their infants. Instead, for most, it's only a 15 minute drive. That's a big difference in a lot of parents' lives."

Samantha Reinhard, the Director of Community Outreach at Sun Life Health, said that a successful delivery starts in the early phases of a pregnancy.

"It's a testament to our education level and our patients being able to like reach out to us and feel comfortable about where they stand,"

Reinhard said. "Unfortunate circumstances can happen quick and if you have that communication established with your provider, you're more likely to call and get the help you need."

The team at Sun Life Health is big enough to be there when you need them, but small enough to know your name, as Reinhard explained.

"The fact is that they are really, the only people you might encounter when you go to Banner Casa Grande Medical Center," Reinhard said. "Unlike other hospitals, you don't get lost in the shuffle of whoever's just on call that day, because it is us!"

Sun Life also offers gynecological care.

Willms added that Sun Life strives to offer the highest level of evidence-based medicine and practice backed up by proven guidelines.

And part of that approach is to opt for the least invasive form of treatment whenever possible.

"90 percent of our surgeries are performed in a minimally invasive manner," Willms said. "Our practice has a very high commitment to minimally invasive surgery."

To achieve this goal, the staff avoids putting a patient under the knife and for example, opts for performing a hysterectomy with a robotic arm, known as the Da Vinci robot.

"My patients go home that day," Willms said. "Whereas if we operated and used the larger incision, they might have to stay in the hospital for 2 to 3 days."

"There's still some pain, but the recovery is much faster."

Regardless of whether a woman's pregnant or in another phase of her life, Willms said that the staff at Sun Life Health are there to help.

"We want women to live their healthiest lives and have a healthy pregnancy," Willms said. "And we really want to help with their problems. Heavy periods or painful periods can be debilitating and really affect a woman's quality of life and we want to help with that."

"We want them to leave our offices healthier and to have a better quality of life as a result of interacting with us. Our commitment to our patients comes first and foremost."

520-568-2245
SunLifeHealth.org

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Communication key to a successful treatment plan

BY C. JON BEECROFT DPM, FACFAS

THOUGHT IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO peek inside a doctor's mind when seeing a patient.

The first thing when meeting a patient is to listen. It is easy to assume, when someone comes in for foot or ankle pain, that it is the same thing we have seen 100 times that week. However, I was once told by a mentor that, "if you listen to your patient long enough, they will tell you what's wrong with them." Gathering information can be from what the patient says, labs, x-rays, ultrasound, MRI's or CT scan. All are valuable methods.

As a physician, we have to make judgment calls daily about one's health, both mentally and physically. One has to look at the entire body, how the patient lives, what their lifestyle is like. In addition, we decide if the treatment

advised to the patient is even possible. A surgery may not be possible if a patient is not able to rest and let the surgery heal properly. Another judgment made is if the patient understands what is being explained to them. Many elderly patients may not hear well or understand what is being talked about.

Physicians think about insurance coverage. The cost of medicine can be very confusing. Insurance dictates how we are allowed to help. For example, often I need an MRI to diagnose a problem. Waiting for an insurance company to clear an MRI can be frustrating. This is difficult for the physician as well as the patient, as treatment can be delayed by insurance.

Thoughts we have at the end of the visit: Did everything get done that needs to be done? Did the prescription get sent? Did

the right prescription get sent to the correct pharmacy? Is the medication covered by their insurance? Did the patient understand what the treatment process will be? Did we see the patient promptly, and did we answer all the questions? Did we return a phone call to the patient's primary care? Did the patient's referral go through to another specialist?

The questions go on and on. We often wake in the middle of the night and wonder what we can do to help our patients.

This is just a small view of what occurs in the mind of a physician while you are being seen. Listening to the patient, making judgment calls, how coverage or insurance plays into the treatment and finally, did everything talked and discussed during the visit get done properly and timely?

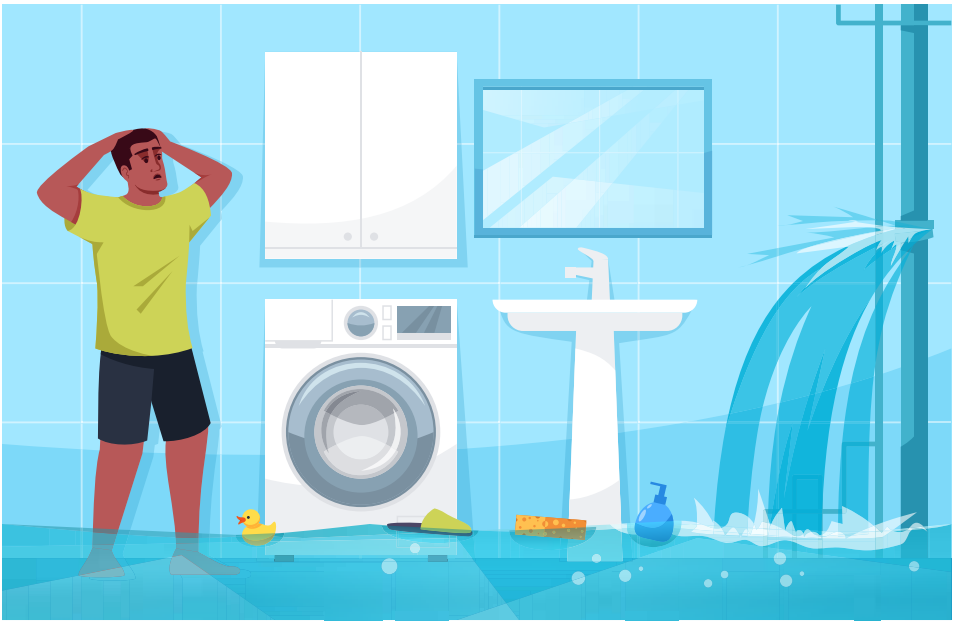
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Springtime is prime for finding, fixing leaks



DID YOU KNOW THAT JUST ONE YEAR of water leaks in your home can waste enough water to fill a backyard swimming pool? Water-wasting leaks include running toilets, faulty irrigation, dripping faucets, and other leaking pipes around your home. Most leaks can be fixed easily and can save your family more than 10 percent on water bills! That's like saving \$1 for every \$10 spent on water.

Before you can fix leaks, you must find them. Luckily Global Water Resources has made that easy!

We invested in our community by installing smart water metering, also known as Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI). All customers in the City of Maricopa have an AMI meter that is linked to the Global Water customer portal.

Use this QR code to sign up if you haven't done so already:



The customer portal allows you to pay your bill online, learn about your near real-time water use, set water budgets for your household, and set up notifications. What is most amazing about AMI is that Global Water will automatically send you a notification via email, text, or call if a possible leak is detected!

Help us celebrate wise water use with our partner, the U.S. EPA, during Fix-a-Leak Week March 14-20. By taking only 10 minutes to walk around your home to find and fix leaks you can save water and money. Are you up for the challenge?

Here are some tips for finding leaks in and around your home:

- Walk through your house listening for running toilets and looking for drips. Drips usually mean leaks.
- Place a drop of food coloring in the toilet tank. If color shows up in the toilet bowl after a few minutes without flushing, you have a leak. Many toilet leaks are caused because the "flapper" is decayed or broken.
- Timed irrigation systems often water your landscape when you aren't around. Turn on your irrigation system every few months and take a walk around your yard looking for puddles and broken drip emitters. This simple practice can save loads of wasted water.

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- 10 months of water to wash laundry



Plumbing: It's the little things

BY TERRY LEAMON, MY MARICOPA PLUMBER

EVERY DAY YOU USE WATER FIXTURES in your home. People take for granted turning faucets on and off, flushing toilets and washing laundry.

When something goes awry with them, i.e. not water coming out or a slow drip, you notice immediately and resolve the issue.

How many times do the little things get overlooked in a home, which can cause some of the biggest problems? Just getting into the habit of doing a regular check on trivial things, every six months, whether by you or a plumber, can help prevent future damage and save you the headache, time, and money.

These "little things" I am referring to are the shut-off valves in your home. For example, angle stops and supply lines to toilets, sinks, water heater valves, washing machine valves and main line shut off valves.


It is as simple as if a homeowner is buying a new appliance or they have decided to move and find the shut off valves behind the washer either don't work or have been leaking over time. We also see time after time, the shut off valves that are corroded or a main shut off valve to the home, where the homeowner must shut water off to the house and the valve does not work.

A slow drip that has gone unnoticed under a kitchen sink, bathroom sink or from toilets, may cause some major damage to homes. Sometimes it's just water damage and in some cases, black mold damage.

By testing and turning your valves on and off, making sure your shut off valves work properly at all water sources and having no leaks, you can stay on top of those annoying little problems that could cost you in the long run.



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Maricopa boys find success in postseason play

It was a wild and crazy night on Feb. 11 at Maricopa High School as the Rams defeated Phoenix Desert Vista 71-63 to win their second postseason game since 2006. The students and the pep band showed up in force to support the Rams, who won their 24th game

of the season. Kevin Patton Jr. (No. 0) finished the game with 27 points, 9 rebounds, 3 assists and 2 blocks. Isaac Warren's four 3-pointers also proved key for the Rams, who led from start to finish. Warren finished with 14 points. The Rams' John Wiltz (No. 2) had 8 points and 6 rebounds, Bryson McLemore-Kelly (No. 20) added 9 points, and Khayree Rashed (No. 35) scored 9 points, and was a force under the basket for the Rams with 13 rebounds.

Victor Moreno



Forever young

At 64, firefighter a source of boundless energy

BY JUSTIN GRIFFIN



NEARLY 19 YEARS AGO, AT THE AGE OF 46, MARICOPA Fire engineer James Huerta wasn't your average whippersnapper taking the Candidate Physical Agility Test.

The eight-part CPAT is a rigorous challenge to show whether a candidate has the physical strength and endurance to handle the demands of being a firefighter.

Firefighting is really for young men and women. By the time they hit 46, many firefighters are thinking of retirement or have already hung up their boots.

For Huerta, it was the beginning of the next chapter of his life. He'd practiced and prepared for eight months before making the trip to Phoenix to take the CPAT for the first time.

But watching fellow firefighters in their late teens and early 20s struggle with the test made Huerta wonder.

"I'm lined up with about 60 young kids of different sizes, nationalities and whatnot," Huerta recalled. "And I'm thinking, 'What am I up against?' I see these kids go before me and they're failing at it; muscular young men failing ... and I'm wondering if I prepared enough."

While other candidates in the physical peak of their lives had youth on their side, Huerta had something that could not be measured — determination.

James Huerta, far right, stands with his teammates inside Fire Station 575. From left, Paramedic Ben Blanco, Captain Josh Eads and Firefighter Anthony Stimac.



Victor Moreno

“

I kissed my wife and my kids goodnight, and then I'd go to school. Two days out of the week I go to school at night, studying and then go right back to work the next day. And that's how I got through my semester work and got certifications.”

JAMES HUERTA

After spending most of his professional life making good money as a plumber, he was on a mission. It dawned on him the trade was going to wear out his body one day, and he would have nothing to show for it — and no way to take care of his family.

“I realized the other guys had all that gumption but what they didn't have I had — the motivation,” said Huerta, who turns 65 this month. “It was the whole idea of why I changed trades — to get a retirement for myself and my family.”

In Huerta's mind, it had all come down to one day — the day of CPAT — and he wasn't looking for any moral victories. Huerta excelled at the events, finishing at Level 1, the highest ranking a candidate can earn.

That wasn't the last day Huerta had to take the CPAT. He's had to take it many other times through his 50s and early 60s, and his ranking remains at Level 1 or 2, which means top physical condition.

But on that day 19 years ago, one event, the stair mill, was particularly memorable.

The stamina-measuring equipment is reminiscent of a StairMaster. Candidates must stay on it for an extended period.

“I went through that thing in a blaze,” Huerta recalled. “I came out at the end, given it my all, and the proctor asked me if I was upset and why I was so mad.”

Huerta explained to the proctor he wasn't mad. In fact, anger had nothing to do with it. He was looking to make a statement. He didn't just want to pass. He wanted to dominate the test and the equipment.

“I'm here to break your stuff,” Huerta told the proctor.

Time for a change

Huerta has always been a man with his eye on the future. Plumbing was the profession that fed his family and kept a roof over their heads. But at 40 and retirement only a couple of decades away, his interests started to change. He was looking for a job that would provide a solid retirement plan, in this case, a pension, and at the same time, make a difference in the lives of others.

Firefighters and other public service workers get the benefit of a pension upon retiring and receive it until they die. And in some cases, their loved ones receive it after they die.



People don't normally give it much thought, but plumbing is a physically demanding job. Plumbers crawl around on their hands and knees, contorting their bodies into strange positions to reach pipes under sinks or in crawl spaces.

“Plumbing was gonna kill my body as I got older,” Huerta said. “My parents, my father, my uncles, my brothers all did it and they all got really weak, and they didn't get to live a long life.”

“It's not that firefighting is that much easier, but I just knew I needed to change my life. This was a change that presented me with the opportunity to reach goals that I had for myself and my family.”

Huerta knew the challenges his age would present as a first responder, but he stuck with it.

“I figured people were going to tell me that I'm too old to even start,” Huerta said. “But I was going to give it a shot. They can't discriminate against my age if I can do the job.”

Inspired by a new way forward, Huerta studied at night to earn his certifications while working his plumbing job during the day.

“I kissed my wife and my kids goodnight, and then I'd go to school,” he recalled. “Two days out of the week, I go to school at night, studying and then go right back to work the next day. And that's how I got through my semester work and got certifications.”

But even with paper in hand, Huerta still had work to do. He needed to learn other skills. He volunteered as a firefighter and worked on an ambulance crew.

“I want to be on a truck,” Huerta said. “I wanted to be on an engine.”

“I got an opportunity to be on an ambulance first, and I took that without a question,” Huerta said, noting firefighters first on the scene often deal with people's injuries.

It was a methodical move by Huerta that pays dividends to this day.

James Huerta snaps a photo with Zollee Hicks, one of a set of twins (the other's name is Zoe) that the crew of Engine 575 helped deliver in 2013. As the twins' mother, Sherese was being driven by her uncle and aunt, it was clear she needed immediate help. The crew met them at the Circle K at the corner of John Wayne Parkway and Smith-Enke Road, where firefighter/paramedic Josh Eads, now the team's captain, helped Hicks deliver the first twin. To his surprise, the girl came out feet-first. The baby was not only breech but also had the umbilical cord around her neck. The second baby was born — again feet first — en route to the Chandler Regional Medical Center. The twins reunited with the crew of Engine 575 back in 2017.

InMaricopa file photo



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JAMES HUERTA AT A GLANCE

Age: 64

Birthday: March 22

Hometown: Phoenix

Wife: Beth Huerta
24 years

Children: Four
sons ages 21, 26, 30,
38; two daughters,
ages 20 and 31

Grandchildren: Three
granddaughters,
ages 18, 16, 14; five
grandsons, ages 13, 6,
5, and 6 months and
another due in March

Activities: Plays
on a semipro travel
softball team

Years of service: 19

Firehouse: Don Pearce
Fire Station No. 575

Ben Blanco, who serves on Huerta's team as a paramedic, took notice of his colleague's bedside manner.

"He's really good at dealing with families," Blanco said. "He goes above and beyond to acknowledge if there's a family member having a medical emergency and taking stock of every member of that household, helping them out, or just putting them at ease. It might be something as simple as giving a kid a fire helmet or stickers.

"He just goes the extra step."

A man of character

Huerta isn't the leader of his team. But if you've spent any time around the man, it's obvious he leads by example and the sheer strength of his character.

Josh Eads, the team's captain, came up through the ranks, beginning as a fireman on Huerta's team.

"I started out working as a firefighter underneath him," Eads said. "Jimmy's been an engineer a long time and I learned a lot from him. I give a lot of credit to that experience for where I am today."

The best leaders are often the best followers.

"What I appreciate and respect about Jimmy is that he's older than me," Eads said. "He could be my father. But he's humble and respectful that I'm half his age and the captain. He could be disgruntled about it. But he's not and we have such a good working relationship."

Huerta agreed.

"There's a lot of respect earned, and a lot of respect given," he said.

Anthony Stimac, a firefighter on the team, has worked with Huerta for nearly 15 years.

"We've been on some crazy calls together," Stimac said. "There's a bond there. We're family. I call him dad, and he calls me son. Anytime I've needed anything, he's been there. If I have a plumbing problem at the house, he comes over and fixes it and doesn't look for anything. He does it out of the kindness of his heart. He and his wife are both



that way and that's why they're so well-respected in the community."

Blanco has only worked with Huerta a year or so but feels a strong connection.

"He's a man of his word and even if that word is harsh," Blanco said. "And I think that, as a society, we're missing that a lot. A lot of men won't take the time to correct young people. From my experience, he's a guy who can tell me personally when I need to do better."

"You can tell when he's got something important to say, because he'll start with 'Mijo', a Spanish term of endearment that means 'my son,'" Blanco added. "He won't say that if he doesn't feel like you will take it the right way. But when he says mijo, you know that whatever he has to say next is important."

Huerta values relationships, especially the one with his wife, Beth, who works at Global Water as their Client Services Supervisor. The two have been married for 24 years.

"She's the most important person in my life," Huerta said. "Beth has been with me through thick and thin. She encouraged me to take the path that I have. Without her, I can't even imagine where I'd be today."

James Huerta says his wife Beth is the love of his life and has served as a guiding light as he's moved from one chapter of his life to the next.

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The next chapter

Huerta is in his 19th year of service with the Maricopa Fire Department, which means in a year he'll give what amounts to a five-year retirement notice, or as it's called, "The Drop." After he gives notice, he can decide to retire at any point in the next five years. If he works five more years, his retirement becomes automatic.

He'll eventually retire, but don't expect Huerta to find a rocking chair and a porch anytime soon. He's still in peak physical condition. In his last CPAT test, he came away with a Level 1 status.

"I'm not going to retire and sit around and think about the days past," Huerta said. "I'm going to keep on trucking. I look at it as the next chapter."


Huerta plays for a semi-pro softball team that travels all over the country. And while that team consists of players his age, they still routinely compete with younger teams.

Huerta also plans on working in some capacity. That could include a job working with a utility company or returning to plumbing in a consultancy role.

"I'm already thinking about it," Huerta said. "There are some young guys in the profession

that I'd like to help. When I was coming up, someone was there to help teach me and make me what I am."

Huerta will keep working, living and playing.

"Sometimes, I get asked, 'when are you going to stop playing ball?' Probably when I can't see the ball or field the ball. If I get hurt playing ball then, hey, I gotta start thinking about something else." 

A BATTLE WITH COVID

James Huerta caught COVID-19 in November 2020. Despite his incredible physical shape, the coronavirus hit hard.

It all started the Saturday before Thanksgiving when Huerta was informed his whole team had come down with the virus and he needed to get tested.

Huerta and his wife Beth both went to a testing site at midnight in Gilbert and a few hours later, the results came back positive.

"OK, well, let's see what happens," Huerta recalled. "Early evening that Sunday, I'm sick and not feeling good. It felt like the flu, no big deal. But Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday — I'm feeling worse each day."

On Thursday morning, symptoms worsened, and Huerta decided to go to the hospital.

"They checked me out," he remembered. "They've got me on double IVs, oxygen and I hear them whispering behind the curtain and I can hear the doctor say, 'This guy needs to go on a ventilator.'"

With only one ventilator on hand, doctors wanted to transport Huerta to the hospital in Chandler.

Hearing this, Huerta decided to step in. "Doc!" Huerta exclaimed. "No vent! Unhook me, give me what I need and send me home. Give me what I need, and I'll do this at home."

The doctor warned Huerta that if things went wrong, there might not be a way to recover. But he eventually relented and allowed Huerta to go home.

"And then I fought for my life," Huerta said.

Even with medication and oxygen, Huerta's condition kept getting worse. On Sunday, a week after his symptoms began, he asked his wife to leave him alone for a few minutes.

"I rolled off my bed and got on my knees and prayed, and said 'Lord, I don't have the strength to do this and if this is the way I've got to leave this earth, it bothers me because of everything I've been through in my life that this is the way I'm going to leave.'" Huerta said. "Give me the strength to fight this, because I can't do it on my own."

From that point, Huerta curled up in bed, numb from the knees down.

"It was a serious situation, I had cramps in both of my legs," Huerta said. "I had to crawl to the bathroom. I couldn't walk."

"I'm just thinking, 'This can't be it. Lord help me. Give me the strength.'"

That Sunday night was rough. He nodded off to sleep that night wondering if he'd wake up.

"And when I woke, the sun was peeking through the window at me," Huerta said. "I said, 'Lord, thank you.' At that point, I felt like I'd made it"

“It was a serious situation, I had cramps in both of my legs, I had to crawl to the bathroom. I couldn't walk.” JAMES HUERTA

Huerta felt stronger but he was only cautiously optimistic. He knew he still had to get through Monday night because he seemed to struggle with Covid more at night than during the day.

"Tuesday morning rolls around and Beth tells me, 'You slept the whole night through. How do you feel?'"

Huerta's legs still didn't work, but he felt stronger and he'd regained his appetite. He asked Beth to go to a local diner and get him two cheese enchiladas, rice and beans.

"I couldn't really taste it too well, but I ate it and it stayed down and then I knew I was going to recover," Huerta said. "I hadn't eaten anything for a week. I'd lost 20 pounds in seven days"

Thanks to Beth's dedicated care and

prayers from people in Maricopa and his softball buddies all over the country, Huerta was making headway. He eventually went back to work, but after a day or two, decided to go back home and finish recovering.

"Josh (Eads, the team captain) was getting ready to come talk to me and I got to him first and told him that I didn't feel like I was up to full speed and that I might be a detriment to the team," Huerta said.

Huerta was happy to be recovering, but he couldn't quite get the "ick" out of his lungs. He decided he needed hard, physical labor to heal.

"I went in the backyard and dug ditches," Huerta said. "I was going to work this thing out of my body."

After a few days, his brand of therapy worked. He didn't realize how well it worked until a year later when he was taking the CPAT once again.

"I felt like my lungs were the clearest they'd been in years," Huerta said. "I could take a deeper breath than before. I finished at a Level 1 and the proctor told me that I was the first 63-year-old front-line fireman to ever do that well on the CPAT at his facility"

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Dawn Houle had the surprise of her life after sending her DNA to a genetic testing service to search for relatives. She uncovered a family secret that led to a reckoning about her own life story.

Bryan Mordt

DNA discovery

Quest to learn more about family led one woman to ‘bombshell’

BY BOB MCGOVERN

DAWN HOULE ALWAYS WANTED to know more about her family tree.

So, in 2013, she joined millions of Americans by taking a DNA test and requesting to be alerted to matches with other users of Ancestry.com.

“I grew up not knowing about any of the family that much,” she said. “I didn’t really know anything about my father’s side.”

She ordered the test, submitted her sample and waited for genetic matches to flow into her inbox.

“I thought it would be cool to know,” she said. “I know I’m a mutt, but what kind of mutt?”

Dawn, 52, has lived in Maricopa since 2016, moving here with husband Rob Vaught to escape the cold, traffic and allergies in Kansas City. They had visited and enjoyed Phoenix and decided to move to the region. A Realtor directed them to Maricopa.

What Dawn knew — or thought she knew — was that she was born in 1969 to her mother, Carol Whitt, at Rochelle Community Hospital in Rochelle, Illinois. She grew up in the nearby rural farming village of Ashton, about 75 miles west of Chicago. Her father was “out of the picture” by the time she was 7, she said.

She yearned to know more.

In fact, she would learn how little she really knew about her relatives. And about the family secret kept from her for decades.

“I thought I was reaching out to find possible relatives,” she said, “not realizing I would have this bomb dropped in my lap.”

“What they did was illegal.”

A difficult childhood

Childhood was rough, Dawn remembered. Money was tight. Her mother lacked ambition and relied on welfare to get by. She cleaned offices for cash under the table, but it was little more than enough to support her smoking habit. They didn’t have a car until Dawn was 14.

“She was uneducated,” Dawn said. “She had dropped out of school in the eighth grade to take care of the farm” after her grandmother

was diagnosed with breast cancer. (Dawn did another DNA test several years ago to determine whether she had mutations in her BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes. The results were negative.)

“She could charm people,” Dawn said of Carol. “She didn’t know a stranger. She was friendly in outside appearances but at home she was mean.”

Dawn’s memories include her mother spanking her with a hairbrush.

“When the hairbrush would break, she would then get mad because I broke her hairbrush,” she said, acknowledging that corporal punishment was more socially acceptable in the 1970s. “She was physically and mentally abusive.”

a 50-year sentence on a second-degree murder conviction for killing his half-brother after they had a heated, alcohol-fueled argument at the home of their mother.

“My dad said, I’m gonna go get my gun and I’m gonna kill you,” Dawn said. And he did.

He then called police to turn himself in.

Carol and Ambrose married in 1979, but he would remain behind bars for about two more decades.

A match

Years went by without any close matches to Dawn’s DNA.

“I referred to my (family) tree as a stump,” she said, laughing.

In 2019, however, Dawn was sitting at her

“I thought I was reaching out to find possible relatives, not realizing I would have this bomb dropped in my lap. What they did was illegal.”

DAWN HOULE

In 1978, when Dawn was 8, mother and daughter moved to Leavenworth, Kansas. Carol had become pen pals with an inmate at the federal penitentiary there and after visiting the man — his name was Ambrose Littlebear — they moved the 350 miles southwest to be closer to the maximum-security prison outside of Kansas City.

Dawn was sad to leave the farm where she had grown up but remembers being excited that she was finally going to have a dad, a fact she remembers Carol hyping ahead of the move. It turned out to be true.

As a child, Dawn had a favorite baby doll named Christy.

“I took her everywhere. I slept with her. She was my best friend,” Dawn said, recalling her mother left the doll in Illinois during the move. “I bawled and bawled for weeks until she had the doll mailed to us.” Dawn still has the doll today.

Ambrose, a Native American, was serving

desk at home on a Friday morning, working her remote job as support program manager for government accounts for ScriptPro, a pharmacy technology company near Kansas City.

There it was — an email alert about a hit on her DNA.

After conducting a bit of research and making a few phone calls, Dawn determined the match was a niece, an odd discovery since she was raised an only child.

She asked Carol’s sister to take a genetic test. The results came back with another surprise: they shared no DNA.

“At that point I knew that either my mom and aunt weren’t sisters, or I was not a part of that family,” Dawn said.

That prompted a difficult discussion with the woman she thought was her aunt. The revelations burst forth.

Carol was not her birth mother, Dawn was told. Her biological mother’s name was Barbara Hughart, and she was a close friend of Carol’s.

I was super upset over it — she's been dead since '09 — and no one in the fake family could say, 'Hey, she wasn't your mother.' I had to beat it out of them, basically.

DAWN HOULE



Clockwise from top left: Houle as a child; Houle with Carol Whitt nee Curry (aka Fake Mom) and her stepdad, Ambrose Little Bear, at Leavenworth federal penitentiary; Houle's biological mother Barbara (at right) with sister Judy (middle) and their mom, Lenore (left); Hannah is a niece with whom Houle has connected; Hannah's father, Robert, is Houle's half brother.

They had both lived in Ashton.

After Barb had become pregnant in 1969, she and Carol cooked up a plan, one kept secret by both families for more than 40 years. When Barb checked into the hospital to give birth, she used Carol's name, Dawn learned. When her baby was born, Barb handed her over to Carol and her husband.

Dawn was shocked and angered at the betrayal.

"I was super upset over it — she's been dead since '09 — and no one in the fake family could say, 'Hey, she wasn't your mother,'" she said. "I had to beat it out of them, basically."

With information from the woman she now calls her "fake aunt" and her new half-brother, Dawn pieced together a picture of her mother at the time.

Barb had been married multiple times and had several children, and apparently a drinking problem. She would work hard all week at her job and then decompress by spending weekends at the bar.

Barb died when Dawn was 12.

The identity of Dawn's biological father is unknown.

Dawn also was told Carol had two miscarriages before Dawn was born. "Who knows if this is true because how do you trust anything at this point?" she said.

But she suspects Carol wanted a baby badly.

"She was from an abusive family, and I think she wanted something that she could love and that would love her back," Dawn said. "I think the idea of a baby appealed to her but then you know as I got older and was no longer a baby, it was kind of like (Carol decided) I don't really want her anymore."

"I have no feelings for her whatsoever, I never really did," Dawn added of her fake mom. "I never felt like I bonded with her. I always felt like an outsider."

No regrets, but questions

Though she has no regrets about the genetic truth coming out, Dawn does wish someone would have told her earlier, before any chance to meet and know her birth mother was sabotaged.

"It was a bombshell, but I now know why Carol treated me the way she did," said Dawn, who thinks her resemblance to her real mother probably bothered Carol as well. "It's kind of tough to feel like my bio mom had raised my other siblings but she didn't want to raise me. She just handed me over."

"Most days I think I'm at peace with it and then sometimes I think I'm just crazy," she continued. "I'll go a long time and have just all good days but

then ... I would like to know who my father is."

She hopes for another DNA match to shine light on his identity.

Another question remains: was the deception her mother's idea, or was it masterminded by Carol?

"I can see Carol being manipulative enough to coerce Barb, maybe planting little thoughts in her head," she said. "I can't say for certain, but it seems like something Carol was capable of."

Dawn no longer speaks to her fake aunt, nor the woman's daughter, who also apparently protected the secret for many years.

But she has gained a bunch of blood relatives — nieces and nephews and lots of cousins. She has three half-brothers, though only one is living, and perhaps a deceased brother, in addition to a half-sister who doesn't want anything to do with the family.

Dawn has really hit it off with her "favorite new relative," a niece named Ashton Brown from South Carolina.

Ashton, 33, the daughter of Dawn's half-brother Scott, who died in the mid-'90s, took a DNA test at Dawn's request to confirm their family ties. It established with 99% accuracy they were related.

They have yet to meet — and hope to do so someday — but have connected long distance, each gaining an appreciation for their newfound relative.

"I love her, we have so much in common," said Ashton, noting their resemblance. "She's my favorite aunt that I've never met. I love her to death and would do anything for her."

An unlikely father

In a story with many surprises, one of the biggest is Ambrose — the convicted murderer and Leavenworth inmate turned pen pal turned stepfather turned Dad.

He became a model inmate, staying away from drugs and other contraband, and showing respect to the prison guards, Dawn said.

"He was a decent guy who made a drunken mistake," she said. "Should you kill somebody? Absolutely not. Were there extenuating circumstances? Yes. I don't think it helped that he had a jury trial, and the jury was entirely white."

He served about 33 years of his sentence before making parole.

He died in 2013, but before his death he became an important part of Dawn's life.

"He was a good role model because he was around people in Leavenworth who were mafia people, bank robbers and that sort of thing," she said. "He was always saying don't do this,

don't do that. He knew where I would end up if I didn't listen to him."

"I love my stepdad and still refer to him as my dad to this day."

In fact, she celebrates his memory with a small tattoo off her right shoulder with his name. More recently, she had that tattoo incorporated into a full back inking inspired by her DNA discovery (see story at right).

Asked if she thought Ambrose knew about the deception at her birth, Dawn said she didn't know for sure, but didn't think so.

"I think he would have told me after Carol died," she said.

Dawn said it's funny when she looks back on the whole affair.

"All throughout my life, when anyone would meet fake mom Carol, they would comment that I was switched at birth or adopted," Dawn said, laughing. "I don't think I had a single boyfriend that didn't tell me that."

"If only I knew then what I know now."



DAWN HOULE AT A GLANCE

Age: 52

Residence: Desert Passage

Family: Husband Rob Vaught. She has one grown son and he has three — both from previous marriages.

Maricopan since: 2016

Pets: Three cats

Hobby: Designing furniture pieces (for her husband to make)

Books: Avid reader of two genres: suspense and historical fiction

Last book read: Harlan Coben's "Win"

Favorite band: Stone Sour from her favorite musical genre, heavy metal



A LIFE REBORN

In her 20s, Dawn had a small tattoo on her hip. In 2013, she added a tattoo as a "fitting tribute" to Ambrose, the man she called Dad. It's a Medicine Wheel, used by generations of Native American tribes for health and healing. It embodies the Four Directions, as well as Father Sky, Mother Earth and Spirit Tree — all symbolizing dimensions of health and the cycles of life.

In January 2021, Dawn decided to add a third, in part to acknowledge the discovery about her birth mother. She took her idea to the Redemption Tattoo shop in Maricopa. A heavy metal fan, she wanted a tattoo that would incorporate a phoenix — a symbol of rebirth from Greek mythology — and the opening lyrics to "Snuff," a song by one of her favorite bands, Slipknot: "Bury all your secrets in my skin. Come away with innocence and leave me with my sins." And she wanted the tattoo for her stepfather incorporated.

Dawn thought the theme of a falcon rising from its ashes captured a life that started in poverty and through diligent ambition and hard work became a very successful life.

Owner Nick Sanchez worked up a drawing he kept enlarging until it was a huge tattoo that would require the canvas of her full back. Finished in June 2021, it was a big, neck-to-tailbone inking that required 20 hours and a lot of pain.

"I feel that's what Carol did to me."



Learn how to 'take care' of yourself

BY HARRIET PHELPS

SO MANY POSTS FROM FRIENDS END WITH "TAKE CARE." It seems a simple salutation at the end of a letter or social media post, however it is an important message.

I am always seeking ways to improve my mental health and wellbeing, to take care in my choices and appreciate them to make life better, not more chaotic.

I start with managing stress and anxiety. Today, we have more anxiety from threats to our wellbeing and more global threats, from a pandemic to warfare.

I recall a story after my stepfather's death; I was 31. In my first experience with grief therapy, I was taking a stress management workshop. I invited my mother, who was experiencing symptoms of grief at our loss.

During a break, we were listening to other participants discuss their experiences and she turned to me and said, "I think I am the only one in here not crazy."

I asked her, "What does that make me?"

She expressed the time-held stigma that if something was happening mentally, it was "crazy." We are not crazy when coping with mental health concerns.

Stress and anxiety have the greatest prevalence, no matter the age. We all have issues with stress in many life circumstances. No one is exempt. We are not crazy if we struggle with coping. Mental health affects our physical health.

Stress is normal in everyday life. Without stress, we are unmotivated. When we experience stress, the brain, specifically the hypothalamus, reacts by releasing stress hormones, the same hormones that make you sense "fight, flight or freeze." The heart beats faster, breathing becomes shallow and fast, and extremities become cold and sometimes blue, as the heart draws blood in around the heart and lungs to ready the body for survival defense.

This response from the primitive brain, the brain stem, is automatic for survival. Stress can lead to overeating or substance abuse, as a means of self-medication.

Illnesses are affected by emotional response, including high blood pressure, stroke, heart attack, diabetes and heartburn.

The brain provides us with warning systems and messages on our health. Dealing with intense worry can be difficult. I encourage you not to worry too much, find ways to relax and learn to stay calm. We often

need to pause and ask, is this about me, do I need to do something, is there a solution, an action I can take to better the situation.

If not, then go find a good laugh.

5 TIPS TO REDUCE THE EFFECTS OF STRESS, ANXIETY

- **Exercise.** Even a 10-minute walk can improve sleep, mood and self-esteem. Exercising burns stress hormones, like cortisol, to return balance in the body. It also produces endorphins, the feel-good hormone, and acts as natural painkiller. Exercise improves sleep, which impacts the risk of anxiety and other health issues.
- **Monitor caffeine and alcohol use.** Caffeine, a stimulant, and alcohol, a depressant, may worsen the stress condition. When anxiety, stress or depression are out of control, seek professional advice for therapy and medication.
- **Meditate or practice yoga.** Both help slow breathing and teach relaxation responses, internally and externally.
- **Eat the right foods.** The closer to dirt the healthier.
- **Laugh.** Nothing is more beneficial than a good laugh with good friends.

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EDUCATION



AP courses can help make college affordable

BY MURRAY SIEGEL

AS THE COST OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION CONTINUES TO increase, parents and students should seek ways to pay for tuition without creating debt. One source of assistance is the Advanced Placement (AP) program.

When a college evaluates a scholarship applicant, much consideration is given to the likelihood of that applicant completing a degree program in four years. Students who have been successful in honors and AP classes are viewed as having a better chance of success in college. And they are more likely to be offered meaningful scholarships. Students who are successful in an AP course can also receive college credit, possibly reducing the tuition bill at the university they choose to attend.

What AP subjects are available at Maricopa High School, and how is college credit determined? Currently, AP courses are offered in English Language, Composition English, Literature and Composition, Calculus AB, Calculus BC, Biology, Chemistry, World History, U.S. History, U.S. Government and Politics, Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, Spanish Language, Studio Art Seminar, and Research.

In May of each year, AP students take an exam; their grade determines if a college will provide them credit for the course. The criteria for credit vary based on the college and the course. Grades range from one (poor) to five (excellent). In most cases a grade of four or five results in the student receiving credit for that course. A college that sees a grade of three on a Calculus AB exam may tell the student that if he/she takes Calculus II and receives a grade of B or A, the school will give credit for Calculus I based on the AP exam score.

Tests are created by panels of high school and college faculty who teach the specific course and are field-tested with college students. Graders are trained to provide consistent and fair grading; supervisory table leaders check the grading of readers. The goal is to allow for a score to be independent of the grader. Consistency is the prime objective.

How should a student prepare for success in AP courses? Develop good work habits in elementary school, take honors classes in middle school and take the most challenging courses in ninth and 10th grades to be ready for AP courses in 11th and 12th grades. Meeting the challenge of AP courses will thoroughly prepare a student for the most difficult college classes. 🗨

Murray Siegel, Ph.D., has more than 44 years of teaching experience and volunteers at Butterfield Elementary School.

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Teri Romero-Dominguez M.Ed.
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In 2022, buy early – it could save you thousands

BY DAYV MORGAN

IF YOU ARE LOOKING TO BUY A HOME, the next couple of months might be the best opportunity to do so for the foreseeable future.

In the spring, the housing market awakens and competition between buyers heats up.

In the last few years, it's been especially intense. Last year, between April and August, the average sales price of a home in Maricopa rose from \$311,000 to \$361,000.

Competition certainly complicates the process. But this year, there may be an added challenge to overcome: interest rates.

In January, Jerome Powell, the Federal Reserve Chairman, in a cryptic fashion, said that there would be increases this year in the prime rate.

Most in the market assume that this year the prime rate will be raised anywhere from 4 to 6 times by 25 basis points (a quarter of a percent) each time.

The Prime Rate is perhaps one of the biggest barometers for our economy. It affects interest rates on credit cards, savings accounts, car loans and, of course, mortgages. A low rate means a booming economy. When rates go up, activity slows down.

For the last few years interest rates have been historically low. This increase in rates is going to make housing more expensive. But by how much?

Let's assume that the average house in Maricopa has a loan amount of \$350,000 at an interest rate of 4.25 percent. On a 30-year mortgage, your monthly payment of just principal and interest will be \$1,721.

If we raise that rate a quarter of a percent to 4.5 percent, the payment increases by \$52.

If all six of those rate hikes come to fruition, that 1,721 monthly payment rises to \$2,042 by the end of the year. And that does not include other


monthly costs that likely apply, such as HOA fees, property taxes, homeowner's insurance, and mortgage insurance.

This could be a boom for homes already on the market. In most cases, you can secure a rate for 60-90 days while you wait for it to close.

It might be a bust for homes that are built to order, where the wait times are up to a year now, due to pandemic-related shortages.

Those buyers will likely have to take the interest rates that are available at the time the house is completed, which could be an increase of nearly 20 percent in each month's payment.

With lower prices than the Valley, Maricopa is always going to be an attractive.

But it's foolhardy to ignore the strong likelihood of interest rate hikes coming this year. It might be best to get in earlier this year, rather than later. 

Dayv Morgan is a Maricopa Realtor and owner of HomeSmart Success.

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Watering with a purpose

BY HARRIET A. PHELPS

I GREW UP IN THE MIDWEST and our biggest concern was whether March would come in like a lion or a lamb according to the blowing winds. February has dealt some windy days involving drought and blowing dust here in the lower desert — and we are ready for spring.

This year, I want to remind everyone to conserve water. The state of Arizona is in extreme drought and has been for many years. Our major rivers and lakes are showing dropping water tables, the white rings around

the edges of reservoirs like a ring around the bathtub.

And as summer approaches and the temperatures start to rise, the water levels will only continue to dissipate.

It doesn't mean that you must sacrifice fresh fruits and veggies. There are ways to enjoy the value that a garden brings. We just have to be smart about it. It's possible to have your cake and eat it, too.

Here are several things we can do while gardening to save water, including:

- Learning to use native plants for the desert. They thrive in our area and are drought-tolerant, so they can survive with reduced water.
- Choose plants for the vegetable garden that take the least number of days to produce, such as tomatoes that produce in 60 days.
- Watering garden and plant life is equally important. First, check all your appliances and irrigation sources for leaks. Repair them right away. A dripping faucet or leaky tubing can be expensive in cost and conservation. Frequently check faucets, toilets and irrigation for leaks.

- Didn't drink that entire glass of water? Pour the excess into a plant or Rover's bowl.
- Learn water requirements for plants and don't overwater. See the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension "blue sheet" handout for three seasons and frequency to water.
- Water use should be minimized. Run water only with purpose. It goes beyond how we use water in gardening and landscaping.

Here are some more ideas for conserving water around the house:

- Use the Navy shower method, which means wet down and wet the soap, then shut off the water. Lather your body while wet, turn on the shower to rinse off, and then turn off the water.
- When brushing your teeth wet the brush, apply paste and turn off the water while brushing. Turn on to rinse. Don't allow water to just run down the drain.

Harriet A. Phelps is a Master Gardener.

Mac-Pinal-MasterGardener.org



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EVENTS

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SATURDAY, MARCH 19

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SUNDAY, MARCH 20

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HOME

most expensive HOME SOLD



43304 W. Little Drive

SOLD Feb. 4

\$ \$635,900

This two-story home in Rancho El Dorado features a 3-car garage, RV gate and stamped concrete large front patio. Enter this tri-level home into the formal living room, up a few steps to the formal dining and large kitchen with stainless steel appliances, stone counters and a built-in desk. The family room has a wet bar and fireplace. Upstairs is a large loft, four bedrooms and an extra-large master with fireplace and access to the balcony along the rear of house. The backyard has a large, covered patio, pool and fruit trees. This home was on the market for 48 days and sold for \$10,000 over the original list price.

Previously
sold for
\$380,000 on
6/24/2017

Community: Rancho El Dorado
Square feet: 3,956
Price per square foot: \$160.74
Days on market: 48

Builder: Hacienda
Year built: 2002
Bedrooms: 5
Bathrooms: 3

- 18510 N. Arbor Drive, Glennville.....\$555,000
- 42594 W. Blue Suede Shoes Lane, Province.....\$550,000
- 22445 N. Van Loo Drive, Rancho El Dorado.....\$540,000
- 44112 W. Palo Abeto Drive, Palo Brea.....\$528,000

least expensive HOME SOLD

40362 W. Peggy Court

SOLD Jan. 23

\$ \$299,500



The least-expensive home sold is a two-story home in Smith Farms. The main floor has a great room, formal dining room, half bath and kitchen with a pantry and island. Upstairs are three bedrooms and two additional bathrooms. The backyard has fence and a view of the common area, large paver patio, and built-in firepit with seating area. The home sold in six days at list price.

Previously
sold for
\$79,950 on
2/9/2012

Community: Smith Farms
Square feet: 1,804
Price per square foot: \$166.02
Days on market: 6

Builder: KB Home
Year built: 2010
Bedrooms: 3
Bathrooms: 2.5

- 20479 N. Lemon Drop Drive, Province.....\$300,000
- 20585 N. Lemon Drop Drive, Province.....\$305,000
- 20310 N. Goodman Drive, Province.....\$312,900
- 42320 W. Morning Glory Way, Province.....\$313,620

Source: MLS, Jan.13-Feb.12

Brian Petersheim Jr.

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SENIORS



Tax season is back: what seniors need to know

BY AL BRANDENBURG

IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR AGAIN. THERE ARE NEW things to consider this income tax season and no, there is no automatic extension to file this year due to the pandemic — unless you specifically ask for it.

For seniors and retirees, an estimated 30% of income will go to health care premiums, prescription drugs and other medical expenses. These expenses may be tax-deductible. If you itemize deductions (forgoing the standard deduction), you may be able to deduct out-of-pocket medical/dental expenses on Schedule A, but only in excess of 7.5% of your adjusted gross income (AGI).


Seniors should be aware if selling a home. You likely have gained substantial equity in recent years. If you lived in your home for at least two of the five years prior to selling, you may not have to pay taxes on any profit. Tax law allows a single filer to claim up to \$250,000 in profit on a home sale with no taxes, and up to \$500,000 for a married couple filing together.

If you are retired or semi-retired, you can still make tax-deductible contributions to retirement accounts like IRAs and 401(k)s. This is perhaps one of the best senior tax breaks available, as you may need to live off your retirement funds. Tax law allows people over 50 to contribute more to retirement accounts than those under 50. For example, a married couple over 50 can contribute as much as \$26,000 to an IRA (for the 2021 tax year) and deduct that amount from their income tax.

Perhaps the best way for seniors to earn income is interest, dividends or capital gains on investments. This income is taxed at a much lower rate, typically 15%, and not subject to taxes for Social Security or Medicare. Expenses related to investments — financial planning or legal fees for advice, for example — that exceed 2% of your AGI may qualify as an itemized deduction.

Seniors who own a business with expenses may be able to deduct some or all expenses that are necessary and reasonable. Typical expenses include business travel, business equipment and the costs of office space, even in the home.

Charitable contributions by seniors are permitted as an itemized deduction, but there are limits. Cash donations may be deducted up to an amount equal to 60% of your AGI. In addition, donation of property can generally be deducted at its fair market value. The deduction of donated property like a car or boat — valued at \$500 or more — that will likely be sold is limited by the gross proceeds from the sale.

My advice is to seek out a good tax adviser. 

Sources: IRS.gov, AARP, thebalance.com, aging.com

Al Brandenburg is a member of Maricopa Community Advocates.

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Recognizing the crucial contributions of women, today and always

BY JOAN KOCZOR

THE THEME OF NATIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH, "Providing Healing, Promoting Hope," is a tribute to the ceaseless work of caregivers and frontline workers during the ongoing pandemic.

It also recognizes the thousands of ways women of all cultures have provided healing and hope throughout history.

Women's History Month celebrates the often-overlooked contributions of women in history, society and culture. Take time this month to recognize their hard work and accomplishments and remind yourself and those around us that women are strong, resilient, brave, gracious and intelligent.

The month-long commemoration started with Women's History Day in 1978, organized by the school district of Sonoma, California. Hundreds of students participated in essay competitions, many presentations were made, and a parade was held in Santa Rosa.

Interest continued within communities, school districts and organizations across the country. In 1980, the National Women's History Alliance championed the holiday to be observed as a national week, an idea backed by President Jimmy Carter, who issued the first proclamation declaring the week of March 8 National Women's History Week.

The following year, Congress forwarded a resolution establishing a national observance. Six years later, the expansion of the event to the whole month of March was successfully petitioned by the National Women's History Project.

For many years, women weren't acknowledged enough in historical texts. Not because they weren't making significant discoveries or aiding important conquests, but mainly because men wrote most historical documents for thousands of years.

Women have a rich history in the military. The Army Nurse Corps were created in 1901 and the Navy Nurse Corps were created in 1908.

The progressive 1900s allowed married women to own property in their own name and keep their own wages. They gained the right to vote in 1920.

More than 11.6 million businesses today are owned by women.

We all have the power to influence the direction our world is headed, and National Women's History Month reminds us of women's major accomplishments each and every day. From domestic chores and carrying babies to fighting wars and governing countries.

Women are pretty darn amazing. There is nothing we can't do if we set our minds to it.

Don't believe me? Check out History.com or many other articles and publications about women who shattered barriers and changed the world! 📖



5 stages of retirement – and why you need to know them

BY RON SMITH

RETIREMENT TYPICALLY OCCURS IN FIVE STAGES: pre-retirement, full retirement, disenchantment, reorientation, and reconciliation and stability. Each stage brings its own set of choices. Understanding which retirement stage you are in helps to position the choices facing you.

- 1 Pre-retirement**, beginning the financial planning that will be the foundation of retirement, may be the most important stage. Setting aside money early makes retirement decisions more fulfilling. During college years and early marriage, such fiscal discipline can be difficult. Keep in mind you are saving for a 20- to 30-year period. The usual guidance, to retire with about 10-12 times your ending income beyond expected Social Security income, is designed to protect from medical expenses, unexpected longevity or early retirement. About half of Americans retire at 61 or earlier. The longer you wait to get started, the harder it is to recover, particularly for average- to low-income earners. The result can be delayed start of retirement, working during retirement or downsizing living expenses. Oftentimes, it is all three.
- 2 Full retirement**, the official beginning of retirement, usually lasts a couple of years. For some, this liberation-from-work phase includes feelings of excitement, relief and freedom from the stress and responsibilities of your day-to-day working life. New retirees may begin traveling, hobbying or reconnecting with family, friends or even their spouses. Others may simply kick back and opt for rest and relaxation.
- 3 Disenchantment** is the let-down from the excitement of the retirement honeymoon. Once the blur of new activities wears off, some may feel a sense of disappointment, or that they are missing something in life. Boredom, loneliness or a lack of purpose can lead to a state of depression.
- 4 Reorientation**, when retirees begin to reevaluate their retirement experience, can be the most difficult stage. It often leads to a new retirement identity, a process that can take some time, but once accomplished bring closure to your work identity and frees you to move on to genuinely enjoy retirement. Find something that provides meaningful purpose, pursue a long-held passion or identify a new one.
- 5 Reconciliation and stability**, the final stage, may not occur for up to 15 years after the official start of retirement, with feelings of contentment and hopefulness and, usually, less depression and anxiety. Retirees enjoy a simple, more relaxed life leading to fulfillment. But health changes are more prevalent now, and the focus can change to independence and health maintenance.



Experiences may vary. Not everyone will go through all the stages in the same way. Transitions can vary based on prior experiences in life, but they all come with an array of emotions and worries. But thoughtful preparation for financial and emotional needs can temper emotions during this significant transition. As a result, you can learn to age well and spend more time enjoying your new life. 📖

Source: Eric Paquette for Wildpine Residence, Stittsville, Ontario, Canada. *Retirement Living: A Guide to the Common Retirement Stages & What to Expect.*

Ron Smith is a living-in-place advocate, a member of the Age-Friendly Maricopa Advisory Committee, a certified aging-in-place specialist and a certified living-in-place professional.

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MARCH
16-20

The Pinal County Fair will offer five days of fun and celebration this month — with something for everyone.

The fair will run from March 16-20 at the Fairgrounds and Event Center, 512 S. Eleven Mile Corner Road in Casa Grande.

Friday night entertainment will include La Brissa. Daily entertainment includes magician Louie Foxx, Casa Grande's own Wildman Phil, balloon man Skip Banks and Cooks' Racing Pigs.

Admission is \$9 for adults and \$5 for children 6-12. Five and under free. Ride tickets are extra.

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1

Maricopa City Council
7 p.m., City Hall
39700 W. Civic Center Plaza

4

MOPS (a group for moms) meeting
9 a.m., Copper Sky
44345 W. MLK Jr. Blvd.

5

Maricopa Master Gardeners Annual Plant Sale
8 a.m. – 2 p.m., Maricopa Agricultural Center
37860 W. Smith-Enke Road

7

Maricopa Historical Society Meeting
5 p.m., Redwood Room
Maricopa Library & Cultural Center
18160 N. Maya Angelou Drive

11

The Needhams in Concert
7 p.m., Maricopa Community Church
44977 W. Hathaway Ave.

14

Maricopa Planning & Zoning Commission meeting
6 p.m., City Hall
39700 W. Civic Center Plaza

Friends of the Library meeting
5:30 p.m., Maricopa Library and Cultural Center
18160 N. Maya Angelou Drive

17

SR 347 Q&A with Mayor Christian Price and Vice Mayor Vincent Manfredi
6 p.m., Maricopa Library and Cultural Center
18160 N. Maya Angelou Drive

18

MOPS (a group for moms) meeting
9 a.m., Copper Sky
44345 W. MLK Jr. Blvd.

26

Friends of the Library Annual Spring Book Sale
9 a.m. – 2 p.m., Maricopa Library and Cultural Center
18160 N. Maya Angelou Drive

30

MUSD Governing Board meeting
6:30 p.m., Maricopa Unified School District Office
44150 W. Maricopa-Casa Grande Hwy.

Sundays

Narcotics Anonymous
7 – 9 p.m., Maricopa Community Church
44977 W. Hathaway Road

Mondays

Narcotics Anonymous
7 – 9 p.m., Maricopa Community Church
44977 W. Hathaway Road

Alcoholics Anonymous
6 – 7 p.m., Community of Hope Church
45295 W. Honeycutt Ave.

Tuesdays

AARP Tax-Aide Income Tax Preparation
9:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.
Maricopa Library & Cultural Center
18160 N. Maya Angelou Drive

Maricopa Cruise-in
5 – 9 p.m., Parking lot behind Burger King, 20699 North John Wayne Parkway.

Alcoholics Anonymous
6:30 p.m., Mountain View Community Church
50881 W. Papago Road

Celebrate Recovery Small Group Meeting
5 – 9 p.m., Maricopa Community Church
44977 W. Hathaway Ave.

Wednesdays

AARP Tax-Aide Income Tax Preparation
9:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.
Maricopa Library & Cultural Center
18160 N. Maya Angelou Drive

Transportation Town Hall set for March 17

Maricopa Mayor Christian Price and Vice Mayor Vincent Manfredi will hold a Question-and-Answer session at 6 p.m. on March 17 on the future of State Route 347 and other transportation issues affecting Maricopa.

SR 347 is the major highway connecting Maricopa to the Valley. Last year, the Arizona State Legislature committed \$35 million for upgrading the thoroughfare. For those who want to know what's next, here's your chance to ask. The event will be held at the Maricopa Library and Cultural Center.



Alcoholics Anonymous
7 p.m., Mountain View Community Church
50881 W. Papago Road

Al-Anon - New Beginnings
10 a.m., Maricopa Library & Cultural Center
18160 N. Maya Angelou Drive

Thursdays

Maricopa Police Cadets meeting
6 p.m., Maricopa High School
45012 W. Honeycutt Ave.

Teen Support Group
6:30 p.m., Northern Lights Therapy, PLLC
21300 N. John Wayne Parkway, Suite 103

Narcotics Anonymous
7 p.m., Maricopa Community Church
44977 W. Hathaway Road

Fridays

Al-Anon - Strength & Home AFG
7 p.m., Community of Hope
45295 W. Honeycutt Ave.

Alcoholics Anonymous
7 p.m., Mountain View Community Church
50881 W. Papago Road

Saturdays

AARP Tax-Aide Income Tax Preparation
9:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.
Maricopa Library & Cultural Center
18160 N. Maya Angelou Drive

ALL EVENTS ARE TENTATIVE

 For details on these and other local events — and to list your own — visit InMaricopa.com/Calendar.

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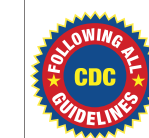
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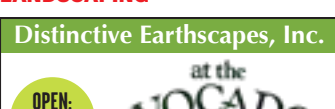
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MUSD Governing Board VP Jim Jordan passes



Proposed county supervisor district shows Maricopa split



State house bill would strip local zoning authority



Tucson restaurant giant coming to town



New softball coach has history of helping out

TRENDING



Maricopa's population headed past 175,000



Sweet new dining option coming to town



Vice Mayor Manfredi elected to rural transportation advocacy group



"Desert Freedom" placed as tenth wild horse, more on way



Pinal County Redistricting 2022 – It is important to Maricopa



Proposed development near Walmart changes course



Major crash on SR347 leaves driver dead




Local tax preparer pleads guilty to felony charge



MUSD, construction team put good fortune to good use

POLL



How has State Route 347 changed your travel patterns?

☐ It doesn't. I just say an extra prayer every day.

☐ I take the back roads. It must be avoided!

☐ I don't leave Maricopa, so it doesn't affect me.

☐ I'm moving out of Maricopa altogether.

Results

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Top Tips for Better WiFi



- Number 5:

Router placement matters.

Walls and other barriers can impede your WiFi signal. Place for your router is a central location with as few obstacles as possible between the modem and your connected devices. Locate it high off the floor, and away from metal objects and other electronic devices that can interfere with your WiFi signal.
- Number 4:

Be aware of what devices are connected to your network and their internet speed capabilities.

More devices connected at once means less bandwidth is available for each device. And some devices can't keep up with faster WiFi speeds, which slows down all the others.
- Number 3:

Close WiFi hungry applications when you're not using them.

Leaving some programs open, like those used for online streaming or video games, will use up bandwidth, even after you've finished using them.
- Number 2:

Protect your network with a strong password.

Choosing a secure WPA or WPA 2 password will protect your personal information, and keep other people from using your bandwidth, thus slowing your WiFi speeds.
- Tip Number 1:

Upgrade your hardware.

Today's all-in-one dual band routers deliver much faster WiFi speeds to more devices.



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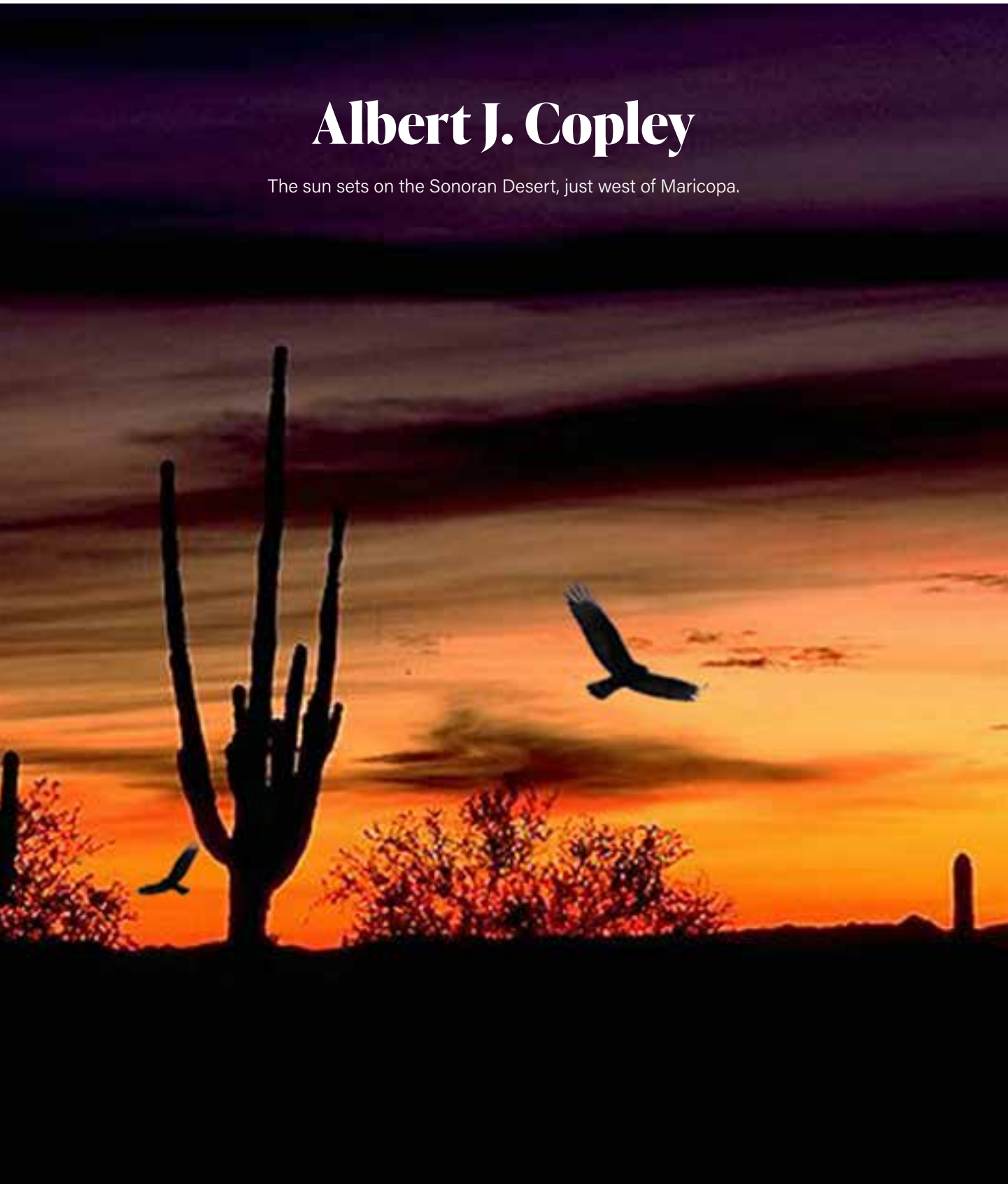
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Albert J. Copley

The sun sets on the Sonoran Desert, just west of Maricopa.



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