



First Vote

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Angelica Vera-Franco will be in South Sacramento Jan. 20th, watching live history on TV: the inauguration of Joe Biden, the 46th president of the United States.

The first-time voter will celebrate, knowing her ballot was among 81 million-plus for President-elect Biden and his running mate, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, cast on Nov. 3. “When I turned 18 that’s one of the first things I was looking forward to, voting,” Vera-Franco said recently. “I’m glad my vote counted for something good.”

The Sacramento State freshman turned 18—the required voting age—just in time for the presidential contest. She supported Biden/Harris, she said, because it was the best option. “The goals of Mr. Biden were better than those of President Trump,” Vera-Franco said, referring to, among other things, Biden’s pledge to unify Americans and to fight global warming.

She also admires Harris, California’s former attorney general. “Ms. Harris seems like a very powerful woman, and I’m all for female empowerment,” Vera-Franco said.

In hindsight, 2020 was epic for Vera-Franco, a Sacramento-born daughter of hard-working Mexican immigrants. For the March California Primary, she served as a bilingual student clerk in a Sacramento precinct. The then-17-year-old greeted voters, directed them to voting booths, and guided them to secure boxes where they deposited completed ballots.

Per California Election Code, Sacramento County has employed student poll workers since 1997. The pupils must be at least 16 on Election Day and undergo extensive pre-election training. In all, the county had 193 high school poll workers for last year’s Primary and 215 for the Presidential Election.

**“I’M GLAD MY
VOTE COUNTED
FOR SOMETHING
GOOD.”**

**Angelica Vera-Franco
New Sacramento voter**

“This has been a wonderful program for student civic engagement and work experience,” Janna Fiori, an official with Sacramento County’s Department of Voter Registration and Elections said, noting that students work alongside, and under the supervision of, expert Election Officers. The goal: “To instill a desire in students to ... become lifetime voters and ... volunteer to work future elections,” Fiori said. After getting her behind-the-scenes look at how democracy works, Vera-Franco wanted to help voters again in November,



Voting is the most precious right in a democracy, Angelica Vera-Franco believes. She voted for the first time two months ago, in the Presidential Election. In the photo, she holds a book that includes one of her poems. The tome was published by 916 Ink. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

but decided not to, fearing COVID-19. That same concern caused her to vote by mail. Three months after the March Primary, she graduated from Arthur A. Benjamin Health Professions High School, a shining jewel of the Sacramento City Unified School District. At that school, Vera-Franco joined an after-school creative writing club. The club’s essays/poems were published in professional books by 916 Ink, a nonprofit supported by The California Endowment. Vera-Franco plans to be a pediatrician. She will watch the televised inauguration in her South Sacramento home, with family.

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Improving Aggie Square

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

The news spread like wildfire in April 2018: A site near Sacramento's Oak Park district had been chosen for Aggie Square, a megaproject that promised thousands of new jobs for the region.

The high-tech research, innovation and education center would expand UC Davis' presence in California's capital, with the university and the City of Sacramento leading a public-private partnership to develop it. For many Oak Park residents, the colossal endeavor—Phase 1 alone would cost \$1.1 billion—caused concern. They feared Aggie Square would displace low-income families, not only from Oak Park but from adjacent sectors.

A suit recently filed in Sacramento Superior Court seeks to alleviate those fears by demanding changes to the Aggie Square plan. The complaint was brought by Sacramento Investment Without Displacement, or SIWD, a coalition born from The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative. The suit accuses the Board of Regents of the University of California of violating state law by green-lighting Aggie Square without properly addressing environmental issues associated with the project, ranging from air quality to housing demand.

According to the suit, Aggie Square would increase UC Davis' Sacramento campus population from 13,500 to 21,200. As a result, Aggie Square as proposed "will exacerbate existing housing inequities and drive displacement in some of Sacramento's most historically underserved communities,"

the suit adds. Oak Park has witnessed an exodus of low-income families amid ongoing gentrification. And Sacramento already has a critical homeless crisis. UC Davis did not respond to an e-mail requesting comment for this story.

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Lawsuit recently filed against proposed Aggie Square venture

City officials have expressed disappointment over the legal challenge, saying it will delay Aggie Square's construction, which was to begin by June. Mayor Darrell Steinberg told KCRA-TV Channel 3 that the city and the community—not including the plaintiffs behind the suit—are "working" on a community benefits agreement, or CBA, that would ensure "tens of millions of dollars for affordable housing for the Stockton Boulevard corridor," plus a local hiring agreement.

The suit seeks to improve parts of the project, but doesn't seek to halt it, emphasized Erica



Unable to afford gentrification-caused higher rents, many Oak Park families have left Oak Park in the past decade. A suit charges many more will be displaced without mitigation of the proposed Aggie Square project. Photo by Edgar Sanchez

Jaramillo, an Oak Park resident, state worker and SIWD board member.

She said the suit followed months of fruitless talks between SIWD and the developers, who balked at signing a legally binding CBA that would detail, for example, investments toward affordable housing and how many Aggie Square jobs would be designated for its underprivileged neighbors. "Because of the filing of this lawsuit, I feel more hopeful about preventing further displacement," she said. The nonprofit SIWD includes social justice advocates and equity-focused organizations. The suit was filed by the Soluri Meserve Law Corporation, a specialist in environmental litigation.

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In Neighborhoods



BUILDING A HEALTHY SACRAMENTO

916 Ink Perseveres

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

The joyful parties at The Imaginarium are over for now—and Ian Hadley, the gracious host, misses them.

The Imaginarium is not a dance hall but a young people's writing center in South Sacramento, a safe space that shut down last March after COVID-19 arrived.

To be invited to a party, boys and girls 8 to 18 first had to attend creative writing classes at The Imaginarium, usually after school. Under the guidance of professional wordsmiths, they created crisp essays and haunting poems in the 1,200-square-foot classroom. Afterward, the alumni would return for book release parties—literary events where they received professionally-produced books containing their prose.

The first-time authors would read aloud from their tomes, drawing applause from proud parents and other guests. “A fair number of parties happened here,” Hadley told a newsman during a recent visit to the shuttered Imaginarium. It’s an operation Hadley oversees as executive director of 916 Ink, a nonprofit supported by The California Endowment.

Walking past empty desks, Hadley appeared wistful, as did Allison Stelly, 916 Ink’s director of development, who unlocked The Imaginarium for a few minutes.

“I miss the energy,” Stelly said, recalling the magic that radiated throughout the room for five years, when youth would sit side-by-

side, stringing words together at workshops that were mostly free.

When COVID hit in mid-March, 916 Ink closed immediately to comply with shelter-in-place edicts. Two weeks later it transferred its curriculum to Zoom. Since then, 916 Ink staff has worked remotely.

“When the pandemic arrived, we had 20 active youth groups across Sacramento County,” with some meeting at The Imaginarium and the rest at schools or community sites under the supervision of 916 Ink facilitators, Hadley said. “We realized there was still a need for our program ... so we adapted it to Zoom.”

“I MISS THE ENERGY.”

Allison Stelly on The Imaginarium’s vanished in-person creativity.

Since March, about 500 children have participated in 916 Ink’s ongoing virtual program, including 250 at a virtual summer camp. Fourteen books have since been published, on top of over 175 printed pre-COVID.

The Imaginarium wasn’t the only site for 916 Ink’s book release bashes; they also occurred at its partner local schools. Sisters Kelly and Kimberly Hernandez enjoyed



916 Ink’s Ian Hadley was flanked by two published sisters recently, near the closed Imaginarium. Kelly Hernandez, 13, (left) displayed one of three 916 Ink books with her compositions. Sister Kimberly, 10, who contributed essays to the tome in her hands, said, “I was really happy and emotional when I first saw my book.” Photo by Edgar Sanchez

their book release parties at Ethel Phillips Elementary. Kelly, 13, participated in three 916 Ink workshops and attended just as many parties at Ethel Phillips, each time receiving an anthology with her compositions. “This program helped me improve my writing,” said Kelly, now an eighth grader at Sutter Middle School. Kimberly, 10, an Ethel Phillips fifth grader, contributed essays to a January 2020 anthology entitled, “Crafty Kids Academy.” She’s now a 916 Ink virtual pupil.

The Imaginarium parties will resume after COVID.

Hadley can’t wait.

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In Neighborhoods



BUILDING A HEALTHY SACRAMENTO

A Sacramento Community and the Police

BY N&R PUBLICATIONS

Why are LGBTQ+ people so afraid of the Sacramento Police Department? To find out, SPD is holding virtual “town hall listening sessions,” so LGBTQ+ residents can answer that disturbing question themselves.

At the first forum, in mid-November, the department got an earful from more than a dozen speakers who collectively described the long, sad history of interactions between the city’s police force and the LGBTQ+ community. Officers unfairly harass and beat LGBTQ+ people, especially those of color, with only a few being respectful, the speakers complained via Zoom. Some even said they avoid dialing 911, fearing that a police response would worsen an emergency.

The second forum, originally set for Jan. 25 with Police Chief Daniel Hahn participating, was postponed and, as of this column’s deadline, had been rescheduled for Feb. 22. “Chief Hahn still plans to take part in this event,” Sgt. Sabrina Briggs, SPD spokeswoman, said in a recent email. “The specific details ... are still being developed.”

Briggs didn’t answer another question: what Hahn intends to say during the forum, which is expected to last two hours. The widely respected Hahn, who became Chief in 2017, may not say much beyond thanking the participants and vowing change. These are, after all, listening sessions, in which

SPD is gathering info, that, it is hoped, will help repair relations between its roughly 680 sworn officers and LGBTQ+ people.

SPD committed to the town halls under a 2019 agreement with the Sacramento LGBT Community Center, which is supported by The California Endowment. Among other things, SPD also pledged that new officers would undergo “LGBTQ-focused community engagement training.”

“IT’S NOT OFTEN WE CAN SPEAK TO CHIEF HAHN.”

LGBTQ+ community member.

Pinpointing how many LGBTQ+ people have been impacted by Sacramento cops is difficult, David Heitstuman, CEO of the LGBT Community Center, told this column. Local law enforcement agencies don’t collect or report sexual orientation or gender identity data through police reports or complaints filed with the city, he noted.

But one thing is certain, he said: “A lot of work (has) to be done to build trust between Sac PD and some of the most marginalized in the LGBTQ+ community, particularly Black and Latinx folks.”



The intersection of 20th and K Streets – overseen by the above sign – is considered the heart of Sacramento’s historically LGBTQ+ Lavender Heights sector.

The ongoing forums can be “a start” toward building mutual trust, Heitstuman believes. That’s why the Center will again distribute invitations, along with links, to the next SPD-hosted virtual town hall, even though it is not the organizer.

About 60 people attended the first virtual town hall. Attendance for the second may be higher because of Hahn’s drawing power. As one queer nonbinary Sacramentan told this column: “I did not participate in the first Sac PD town hall. But I want to attend the next one. It’s not often we can speak to Chief Hahn.”

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A Last Word

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

All good things must come to an end. And, sadly, this is the Sacramento News & Review's final California Endowment column—one that has delivered essential news about 200 times since 2012.

Before the farewell, a little background.

In 2010, The California Endowment launched a 10-year, \$1 billion initiative to improve the health of Sacramento and 13 other high need communities statewide, through a partnership between TCE and local entities, mostly nonprofits that would receive Endowment funds. The ambitious plan sought to enhance employment opportunities, education, housing, neighborhood safety, environmental conditions and other crises in Sacramento's underserved sectors.

This column debuted in 2012 to document the plan's progress in Sacramento. Commissioned by TCE, it was produced by N&R Publications, which is independent from SN&R's news division. Now that the initiative is ending, leaving a legacy of success, so is this column, which reported on everything from anti-police brutality rallies to voting drives.

The first five California Endowment columns appeared in 2012, without bylines. The sixth, dated May 24, 2012, finally had a writer's name: Linda DuBois. "When I wrote that article, I had no idea I'd be the first byline

on what would become" an enduring series, DuBois, now an associate editor at The Davis Enterprise, said recently. "I'm proud to know I helped kick off ... a (long) series about dedicated citizens' efforts to make their community better, safer and healthier."

"... I HAD NO IDEA I WOULD BE THE FIRST BYLINE ..."

Linda DuBois, author of first bylined Endowment column, published in 2012.

Her byline graced several other columns until 2015, including one about a pastor who guided at-risk kids away from trouble in Oak Park. "I asked the pastor what motivated him," DuBois said. "He replied he was tired of doing so many funerals for young people who died from violence and then ministering to their grieving families afterward. 'I never forgot that.'"

More than 20 writers took turns authoring this column, SN&R files show. Some wrote one or two; others many more. In all, roughly 220 columns, each with at least 400 words, have been published, usually every two weeks. At least 15 were actually ads that,



No one was prouder to be in a TCE column than Abe Ruiz, owner of Anthony's Italian Cuisine in South Natomas. In August, Ruiz expressed strong support for the 2020 Census. The resulting column, with his words/picture, is at Ruiz's restaurant, in a pro frame. "This story meant a lot to my Dad," his daughter, Crystal Ruiz (above) said. "We're sad the column is ending." Photo by Edgar Sanchez

in a few words, powerfully promoted TCE-supported causes such as the need to end the school-to-prison pipeline.

The final columnist, Edgar Sanchez, wrote 101 columns, most of them produced during the last four years. His statement: When I took on this job, I had 32 years' experience writing for American dailies. As a columnist, I tried to be fair to all. Just as before, I also sought to prove that a reporter needn't be a rude bulldog to do his job. Good manners go a long way. I was honored to write this column. My gratitude to the newsmakers/readers.

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