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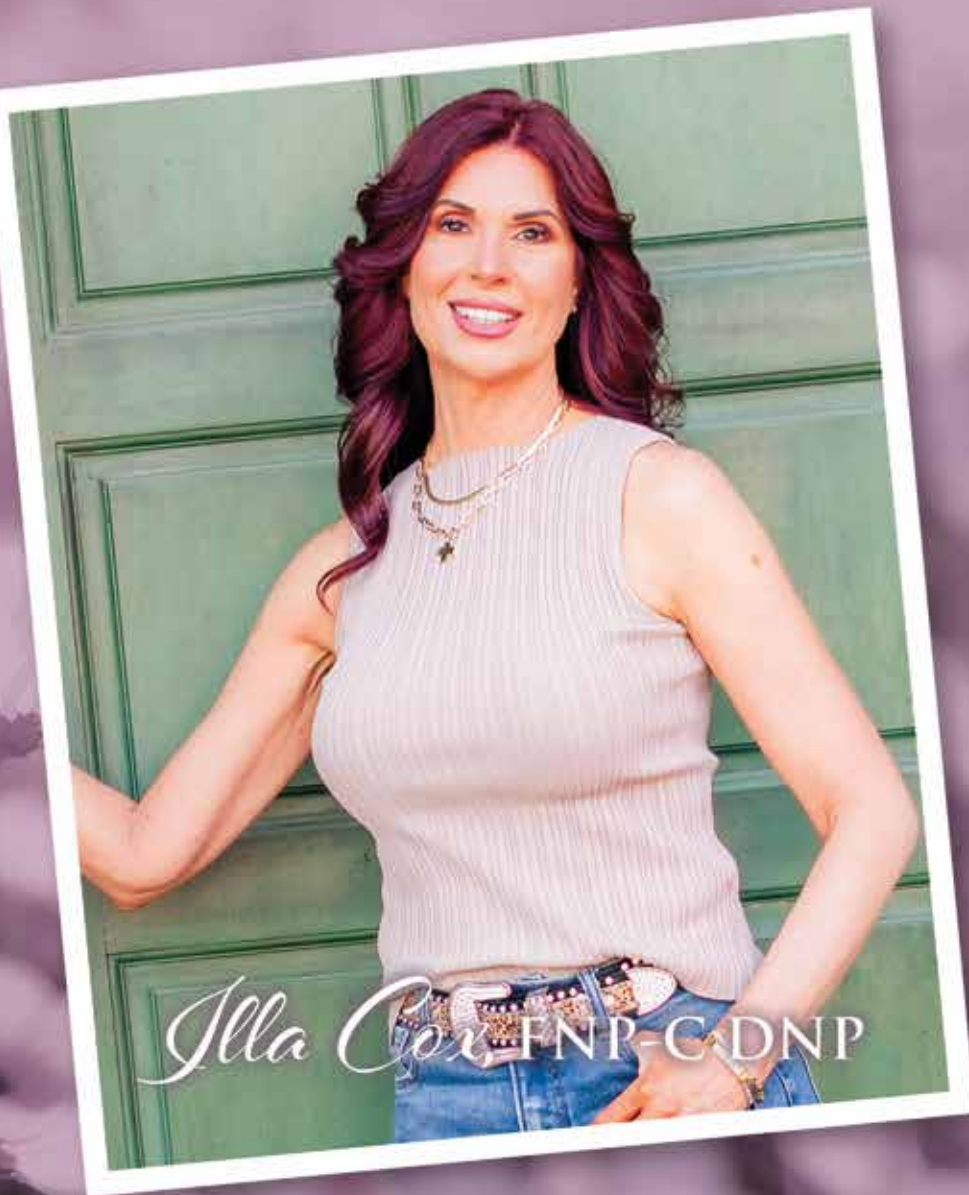


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"I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples." Lizeth Granados is carrying out this mission of Mother Teresa through many small acts with Health Plan of San Joaquin in our community. With her leadership, HPSJ will continue to meet the needs of close to 400,000 individual members in the four counties it serves today.



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M.A.S.H

If you grew up in the '80s or '90s, chances are you spent at least one afternoon huddled over a piece of lined notebook paper, feverishly playing M.A.S.H. Now I have seen it making a comeback, though it's not as popular as when I was a kid.

For those of you not familiar with M.A.S.H., let me try to explain it! We would draw a tight, swirling circle, count the loops, and use that arbitrary number to systematically cross off our destinies that were broken up into categories. Some of the categories were Career, Car, Husband, Number of Kids, Pets, Housing (Mansion, Apartment, Shack or House, hence M.A.S.H.). We would write down four options in each category; yes, as I kid, I thought having a limo would be the coolest thing ever and my go-to careers were either an LPGA golfer or veterinarian.

Looking back, our 12-year-old options were a chaotic blend of ambitions, ideas and practical childhood irony. We routinely scribbled down Doctor and Lawyer, viewing those traditional paths through a cinematic lens. We added Teacher for the mentors standing at the



front of our classrooms every day.

And then, because every good game of M.A.S.H. needed a wild card to keep things interesting, someone would inevitably write something crazy in a category!

Decades later, as Carrie and I were putting this issue together, I found myself thinking about that paper game. Adult reality eventually revealed what our childhood selves couldn't yet grasp, that every single one of those paths demands profound dedication, and each serves a vital purpose.

Life, of course, rarely follows the algorithm of a folded paper game. Some of us landed precisely on the career we penned in ballpoint ink decades ago. Others took wildly unexpected detours, building meaningful lives in industries we didn't even know existed at age 12.

In this issue, we celebrate the full spectrum of career professionals driving our workforce forward. Whether your professional journey was mapped out from childhood or forged through trial, error and sudden pivots, your work matters.

Enjoy every moment,

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Beauty of the Valley



A Mirrored View

This month's Beauty of the Valley image highlights the striking modern architecture and reflective water features of Stockton's Brookside area, home to many of the companies and career professionals who help make our community a wonderful place to live and work.

Featured in this issue celebrating Career Professionals, the scene reminds us that many local businesses are set within inspiring environments where architecture, water and nature come together to create spaces that encourage creativity, productivity and connection.

Vibrant colors, repeating architectural forms and the still

surface of the water create a striking sense of balance and harmony. Mirror-like reflections transform the modern buildings into an almost abstract composition, while the surrounding trees and landscaping soften the scene with texture, color and life. Together, these elements create a peaceful cityscape where thoughtful design and nature exist in perfect balance.

As we go about our busy lives, it's easy to overlook places like this. Yet throughout Stockton and the Central Valley, moments of beauty surround us every day, waiting to be discovered. Sometimes all it takes is slowing down for a moment to realize that inspiration has been there all along. •



Kevin Richtik is a Brooks Institute of Photography graduate and the owner of Stockton-based Caroline Photography, a studio deeply rooted in the community.

He has photographed thousands of local families and worked with a wide range of regional and national companies with his photography appearing in numerous publications. Kodak has featured his work in worldwide advertising to showcase its products.

In addition, Kevin creates a wide range of fine art images, including sweeping landscapes of the San Joaquin Valley, and is creator of the ongoing Beauty of Stockton photo project, a weekly series that highlights the city's unique and often overlooked strengths, showcasing Stockton's vibrant, positive spirit. The project has expanded to include the Beauty of the Valley.

You can view and share each week's Beauty of the Valley post at: www.facebook.com/kevin.richtik or www.instagram.com/carolinephotography209



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Lizeth Granados

Caring Hearts as a Catalyst for Change

BY RACHEL FENTON

PHOTOS BY KEVIN RICHTIK, CAROLINE PHOTOGRAPHY

In community, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Through the quiet labor and sacrifices of its members, a simple gathering of people is transformed into a catalyst for change, accomplishing things that no one could have done on their own. And in every community, there are those who inspire others to greatness through their own actions. From those people, the CEOs, social workers, caretakers and volunteers alike, organizations develop and become backbones of support for those who need it most. Health Plan of San Joaquin is one such organization, and its CEO, Lizeth Granados, continually inspires those around her through her humility, hard work and dedication to the people she serves.

Health Plan of San Joaquin is proud to serve over 380,000 members across several counties, with plans of continued expansion. As a



“You always need to treat people the way you want to be treated, regardless of a person’s role, whether they’re a member or someone out in the community. Treating people with respect and care carries a lot.”

health plan provider that serves the Medi-Cal members in the region, their mission is to “provide high-quality healthcare for our members through community partnerships.” This year marks the 30th year since its founding, and although the anniversary may not be marked with elaborate fanfare, HPSJ continues to stand as a bulwark of the Central Valley community. As its CEO, Lizeth has helped maintain Health Plan of San Joaquin through her leadership and expertise. With more than 15 years of experience in health care and community wellness, she has worked with HPSJ for six years, initially serving as its COO and in the role of its CEO for the last three years. “It’s a great organization that’s so mission focused,” she said. “I love our mission. I love the fact we’re here for our members and we partner with the community as a whole to be able to do that.”

EARLY CHOICES

When Lizeth first entered the work force, she wasn’t sure what career path she wanted to take. “I’d always wanted to be a teacher,” she said, and for years she worked toward an academic career.

Throughout high school, she did volunteer work tutoring children who lived in homeless shelters, helping them with their homework and keeping track of their assignments. “It was a really great experience for me at that time, being able to support them and help the students develop the skills to do well in school,” she said. She studied political science throughout college and chose sociology as her master’s degree focus with the intention of teaching. But the brief time she spent teaching in an academic environment soon taught her that it wasn’t what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. “I realized that it wasn’t for me,” she said. “I did know that I did like helping people; I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do, but I knew that’s what I wanted to focus my career in.”

After she obtained her degrees, Lizeth had the chance to work for a nonprofit organization that served low-income Latino immigrants, and it was there she found her true calling, working in the nonprofit sector and serving the Medi-Cal population. “I always enjoyed doing research. I was always fascinated by the social interactions and how it impacted people as a whole,” she said. “That theme still carries through in my career, society as a whole and what we can do to better our community.”

RETURN TO NONPROFIT WORK

From that initial nonprofit job, Lizeth transitioned to managing a Medi-Cal program for seniors and people with disabilities. Through her grit, determination and heart for the population, her role continued to expand until she was working with provider services and operations. She spent a few years working in the private sector while



also continuing to serve the Medi-Cal population, but she eventually returned full time to the nonprofit sector. “I always kind of knew that Medi-Cal was where my heart was,” Lizeth said. When the opportunity arose to work with Health Plan of San Joaquin as their COO, she accepted it immediately, relocating from Southern California to the Central Valley. “It’s been really helpful to kind of grow into the role; I worked my way up throughout my career,” Lizeth said. As a lifelong Californian, she soon fell in love with San Joaquin County and the surrounding areas. “It’s such a great community,” she said. “Everyone is so warm and welcoming; everyone is willing to work together to achieve our common goal.”

From its humble roots as a local health plan provider solely located in San Joaquin with under 50,000 members, Health Plan of San Joaquin has grown exponentially in its numbers and offerings. The company had been growing for quite some time; in 2014, it expanded into Stanislaus County and two years later it received the National Committee for Quality Assurance, or NCQA, accreditation. Lizeth’s work with HPSJ has been particularly inspiring and innovative. Under her leadership, HPSJ expanded into Alpine County and El Dorado County under the name Mountain Valley Health Plan. Most recently Health Plan of San Joaquin launched a Dual Eligible Special Needs Plan, or D-SNP, which helps with coordination of care for those who have both Medi-Cal and Medicare, working to make sure individuals can take full advantage of the resources available to them.

INVESTMENTS IN MEDICAL ACCESS

Throughout all these achievements, they have continued to make

investments into the community by contributing to projects such as the BeWell Behavioral Health Campus expansion and partnering with Cal State Stanislaus to help with their program center for training nurses, as well as offering opportunities to obtain community health worker certificates. They have invested over \$50 million in their Community Reinvestment Program, which helps a variety of programs that increase medical access for their members. “A lot of the investments we’ve made are to improve overall care for members in our community and build longevity for the health care system as a whole. That’s probably one of the things I’m most proud of,” Lizeth said. “At the end of the day, it’s really where my heart is, to ensure that we are all doing what we can to better the overall community and to be able to do what we can to support our members.”

And its membership is substantial. Alongside HealthNet and Kaiser Permanente, Health Plan of San Joaquin has the largest volume of Medi-Cal membership. Roughly 26 percent of the residents of San Joaquin County are members of HPSJ. “If you’re not our member, you probably know someone who is a member,” Lizeth said. But whether you’re a member or not, they emphasize the importance of health and preventive care for every individual. “Ensuring that you’re healthy is probably the most important aspects we can focus on,” she said. The overall health of the community is inseparable from the health of the individuals. Many of the services they invest in and provide are focused on providing education and access to as many people as they can, whether it’s making sure people have access to basic immunizations or can see their doctors for their yearly checkups. “That’s probably one of the most fulfilling aspects of my role; we’re here to be

able to serve the community as a whole and find innovative ways to address any social disparities that we may have in our community,” Lizeth said. “Our intention is to continue to grow and ensure that we are growing alongside what the needs are in the community.”

TEACHING OTHERS

Lizeth’s career is an inspiring arc of growth and a testament to the power of hard work, humility and a heart for helping others. Although she has inspired countless other professionals in their own careers, she brings the focus back to those who helped her in her own journey. “I’ve been able to learn a lot from individuals who are in completely different fields,” she said. “I’ve been able to gain a lot from their insight on how to be a leader and what that looks like.” She doesn’t consider the years she spent working toward a career in academia as wasted. In fact, she appreciates what the experience taught her about trusting her intuition and learning to be flexible and take risks. “You never know what will be the right fit for you,” Lizeth said. “It’s okay to change gears; it’s beneficial to take those risks.”

Her advice to young professionals comes from her own experience. She encourages them to avoid becoming static and instead look for ways to grow in skill and capacity. “There are different expectations for every role and different skillsets that are required. Ensuring that you’re evolving along with the roles is always important,” she said. But above all, she encourages young professionals to look for the humanity in every person, regardless of their position or experience. “You always need to treat people the way you want to be treated, regardless of a person’s role, whether they’re a member or someone out in the community,” she said. “Treating people with respect and care carries a lot.”

Throughout the past 30 years, Health Plan of San Joaquin has stood as a testament to the power of community. It has helped lift up those who need it the most, provided resources to those without them, and enabled education for vast portions of the population. As they look forward to the decades to come, they aim to grow with the same mindset that has brought them so far, a mission of mutual flourishing, addressing disparities with innovation. The growth it has experienced under Lizeth’s leadership is only the beginning; they plan to eventually expand their offerings to provide for as many people as they can. But above all, their focus is on the needs of the community that they serve. Lizeth is passionately committed to ensuring that they remain a backbone of the local community and provide the services their members require. With her at the helm, leading by her humble and hard-working example, Health Plan of San Joaquin will continue to stand out as evidence of the power of caring hearts, selfless labor and community as a catalyst for change. ♦



“It’s okay to change gears; it’s beneficial to take those risks.”



CHECK IN

with Dr. Ruby Gill

LET'S CHECK UP ON... PEAK CAREER. CHANGING HORMONES. WHY WOMEN SHOULDN'T HAVE TO CHOOSE.

By Dr. Ruby Gill, MD, ABOIM, ABFM
Double Board-Certified in Family & Integrative Medicine
Menopause Society Certified | Fellowship-Trained in Aesthetics

For many women, their 40s represent a professional peak. Years of education, experience, leadership and hard-earned confidence finally converge. Yet biologically, this is also when many women begin the transition into perimenopause.

The irony is difficult to ignore: just as women may be reaching their greatest professional potential, changing physiology can begin affecting the very skills their careers depend upon.

Brain fog. Poor sleep. Changes in mood. Fatigue. Reduced stress tolerance. Difficulty concentrating. These symptoms can quietly erode confidence and productivity—and are too often dismissed as simply being overwhelmed, aging or “doing too much.”

In my practice, I have encountered accomplished women who began reconsidering how long they wanted to work because they no longer felt as cognitively sharp as they once did. What is remarkable is how differently some feel when the underlying contributors to their symptoms are appropriately evaluated and treated.

We routinely recognize thyroid dysfunction as a physiologic condition capable of affecting cognition, mood, metabolism and energy. The hormonal transition of midlife deserves similarly thoughtful medical attention.

That does not mean every symptom requires hormone therapy, nor that hormones explain everything. It means women deserve a comprehensive evaluation rather than an assumption that declining performance is simply something they must accept.

FROM WORK-LIFE BALANCE TO WORK-LIFE EFFICIENCY

Health optimization also extends beyond prescriptions.

Wearable technology has given us something extraordinarily useful: feedback. Sleep, resting heart rate, activity and other physiologic trends can help us recognize that mental strain creates physical consequences, too.

The objective isn't to eliminate ambition. It is to become more efficient with our effort—and more intentional with our recovery.

We have normalized eating lunch at our desks, answering

messages through dinner and falling asleep exhausted as evidence of dedication. But exhaustion is not the same thing as relaxation.

Our bodies need time to transition from the stress response into the rest-and-recovery response required for restorative sleep.

Turn off the notifications. Take the lunch break. Spend more than 15 minutes eating. Chew slowly rather than inhaling a meal between meetings. Give your nervous system periods when it is not expected to perform.

These seemingly small behaviors are physiology, not indulgence.

SOMETIMES THE BASICS ARE STILL THE BEST MEDICINE

Wellness culture can make health unnecessarily complicated. There will always be another supplement promising energy, focus or longevity.

Supplements can have an appropriate role, but they cannot replace physiology.

Adequate protein and whole foods matter. Omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D and magnesium may be appropriate depending upon the individual. Movement matters. Muscle matters. Sleep matters. Hormonal health matters. And learning how to intentionally enter a state of recovery matters.

The emerging conversation around professional longevity should therefore be about more than working less.

It should be about working well, recovering well and preserving the physiology that allows us to continue doing meaningful work.

Success and wellness do not have to exist on opposite sides of the equation. At this stage of life, perhaps the better objective is efficiency with preservation: protecting our health while using the expertise we spent decades building.

Because finding purpose and being successful can, in fact, mean the same thing. •

Schedule your integrative medicine consultation with Dr. Ruby Gill today! Take the first step toward thriving again with personalized, evidence-based care tailored to your unique needs. Let Dr. Gill help you reclaim your health, confidence, and joy!

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BY JO ANN KIRBY

Shauna Buzunis-Jacob has taken the helm as chief executive officer of the Child Abuse Prevention Council. The nonprofit organization's goal is to protect children and strengthen families through awareness and outcome-driven programs delivered with compassion. CAPC provides a lifeline for families in crisis. It offers parents the tools to become better caregivers, helps children heal from abuse and works to improve the quality of life for families in need. The importance of this mission comes with great responsibility.

"I am excited to share that, following her 90 days as interim chief executive officer, the board of directors has unanimously appointed Shauna Buzunis-Jacob as the permanent CEO of the Child Abuse Prevention Council," April Farage, CAPC board president, said. "During this time, Shauna has demonstrated exceptional leadership, resilience and an unwavering commitment to our mission. She has guided CAPC through an important period of transition with compassion, focus and determination, helping position our organization for a strong future." Farage said the milestone also reflects the dedication of CAPC's incredible staff, whose professionalism and commitment have made the transition a success.

Shauna loves the impactful environment she's in; she sees this positive council for what it is, having spent the past 15 years at CAPC as development director. "I have had the privilege of witnessing firsthand the incredible impact our staff, volunteers, partners and supporters make every day," she said. "Their dedication and compassion inspire me, and I am proud to continue serving alongside such an extraordinary team."

Shauna knows the CAPC plays a vital role in protecting our community's most vulnerable. In 2024, there were approximately 11,000 calls into Child Protective Services in San Joaquin County and 650 of those reports were substantiated cases of child abuse.

As CAPC moves forward, Shauna affirmed, "Our focus will be to reach more children and families; develop innovative solutions to meet our community's evolving needs; strengthen partnerships throughout San Joaquin County; and to ensure every dollar entrusted to us creates meaningful, measurable impact.

"I truly believe the best is yet to come, and I look forward to working alongside all of you as we write the next chapter of CAPC's story," she concluded. ♦



SHAUNA BUZUNIS-JACOB

Dr. Cristina Funghi

An Advocate for Our Future

by Rachel Fenton

Children are our future. They are an essential part of our community, and their health and happiness are directly tied to our future as a society. Children are also among our most vulnerable populations; they need people in their corner advocating for them, championing for their care.

As the head of pediatrics at St. Joseph's Medical Center in Stockton, Dr. Cristina Funghi is one of our community's champions for children. She has dedicated more than a decade of her life to helping sick children and their parents navigate emergencies or difficult diagnoses, and she considers her vocation both an honor and a privilege. "Sometimes I'm there for the absolute worst day of a parent's life; I'm glad that I can be there to help either facilitate or ease just a portion of that day," Dr. Funghi said. "I like to be that buffer. I feel so honored to be part of that process; it's the biggest honor that anyone can give."

When Dr. Funghi was in high school, her grandmother was diagnosed with colon cancer, and walking with her family through that journey is what initially inspired her to go into medicine. "I loved her family doctor. I thought I'd be a family medicine doctor," she said. As she attended UC San Diego for her college education, she volunteered at a local hospital's burn unit. It was there she fell in love with working with children, and as she went through medical school at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and specifically her rotation in the OB unit, working with babies in the NICU, she knew for certain she wanted to focus her career on pediatrics. "Pediatric patients are the rock stars of medicine," Dr. Funghi said, describing their attitude and resilience in the face of some of the most difficult circumstances. "I enjoy being part of the journey and working with the families during that difficult time in their lives to help make it as much of a typical childhood as possible. We want them to be able to grow and thrive."

Dr. Funghi's love and care for pediatric patients isn't only professional; there is also a personal element. She experienced being the parent of a patient firsthand when her eldest was born with a congenital heart defect, requiring surgery as a newborn. "I'm personally well acquainted with the surprises of life, having to deal with that journey and the effects of it, not just in that moment but in the long term," she said. "If anything, it's made me a better physician, having that personal experience." It also gave her a unique connection with the parents of her patients, helping her deliver difficult diagnoses with compassion and honesty. "I don't sugarcoat it or do euphemisms," she said frankly. But above all, she emphasizes that she will walk alongside them for the entire journey. "That's what I love about my job, getting the parents to where they need to be to help their child thrive," she said. "At the end of the day, parents are their child's advocate. We're not adversaries. We're on the same team."

Her compassion is rivaled only by her intellectual curiosity and her humility. She loves solving problems and learning new things to help her patients and find solutions in the midst of the chaos, whether she's diagnosing rare diseases or helping solve something that's plagued a patient for years. "I love that there are puzzles out there to challenge us physicians, and when we do figure it out, we make a huge impact on a patient's life in a positive way," Dr. Funghi said. But in the midst of solving the puzzles, she never loses sight of her limitations and is the first to admit she doesn't know something. "We are not all knowing," she said. "You cannot predict the future, and you have to be okay with the 'I don't know.'"

St. Joseph's recently both renovated and expanded its pediatric unit, a move that demonstrates their dedication to Stockton's growing population and its future. "It's investment in the community, an investment in the care of our families and our community," Dr. Funghi said. "We're here to take care of children and their families." As the only pediatric care unit in San Joaquin County, they want the community to know that they don't have to drive hours for excellent care for their children during emergencies or illness; St. Joseph's has a pediatric hospitalist on staff 24/7. "We have holistic family care," she said, and she emphasized that above all, they see themselves as advocates for their community's health. "We're not a customer service; we're a care service. We want people to be healthy; we want people to thrive." 🌟



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Pacific
HomeCare
Services

Left to right: Vanessa Perez, Alejandra Quevedo, Maria Mallari, Jacqueline Sandoval, Irlanda Aranda, Galilea Muñoz

Homegrown Leaders, Heartfelt Service

Meet the Stockton professionals shaping the future of care at Pacific Homecare Services.

BY SOFIA ROBLES

They say home is where the heart is, and for these young professionals, Stockton is more than the place they call home. It is the foundation for careers built on compassion, service and a commitment to making a difference.

Whether they left Stockton to pursue higher education before returning home or chose to build their careers locally, each shares a passion for serving the community that helped shape them. Today, they carry that commitment forward through their work at Pacific Homecare Services.

Since 2005, Pacific Homecare Services has proudly served Northern California families by providing quality non-medical in-home care that empowers seniors, individuals with disabilities and their families to live with dignity

and independence. Built on a foundation of honesty, respect and kindness, the organization is more than a home care provider—it is a place where employees are encouraged to grow while making a lasting impact.

Meet the seven young professionals representing a new generation of leaders who are proving that success and service can go hand in hand while shaping the future of in-home care at Pacific Homecare Services and throughout the Stockton community.

Galilea Muñoz

INTAKE COORDINATOR

After studying social work at Sacramento State University, Galilea Muñoz found more than a career at Pacific Homecare Services—she found a purpose. Returning home

to Stockton inspired her to give back by helping individuals and families navigate difficult moments with compassion. She credits the organization with helping her grow professionally while becoming a better colleague, parent and person. Her advice to young professionals is to embrace unexpected opportunities because they often lead to the greatest growth.

Irlanda Aranda

OFFICE SPECIALIST

Irlanda Aranda began her journey with Pacific Homecare Services while earning her psychology degree at the University of the Pacific. Starting as a care provider and later joining the office team, she now helps connect families with the resources they need. Passionate about changing the narrative surrounding Stockton, Irlanda believes the city is full of opportunity and hopes to help others discover the support available within their community. She encourages young professionals to invest in their hometowns and never stop advocating for what they believe in.

Laura Hernandez *(Not Pictured)*

TRAINING ASSISTANT

Laura Hernandez earned her degree in sociology with a concentration in human services from California State University, Stanislaus before joining Pacific Homecare Services after three years as a substitute teacher. Inspired by her mother, who has served the organization for nearly 15 years, Laura is proud to continue a family legacy of compassion. In her role, she helps prepare care providers with the training they need to confidently care for clients and families. She believes that with the right mindset and a caring heart, anyone can make a meaningful difference.

Maria Mallari

MARKETING MANAGER

After graduating from San José State University with a degree in marketing, Maria Mallari chose to return to Stockton to build a career with purpose. A first-generation Filipina raised on Stockton's south side, she was eager to give back to the community that shaped her. As marketing manager, she develops campaigns, improves processes, and creates employee appreciation initiatives that support Pacific Homecare Services' mission. She believes success becomes even more meaningful when it creates opportunities for others and strengthens the community you call home.

Vanessa Perez

HR ANALYST

Growing up in Stockton, Vanessa Perez dreamed of attending the University of the Pacific. Through the Community Involvement Program, she earned a degree in business administration with concentrations in finance, business analytics and human resources management before returning to Pacific Homecare Services after completing an internship. She believes Stockton invested in her, making it only natural to invest back in the community. Vanessa describes Pacific Homecare Services as a place that feels like home and encourages others to work hard, stay curious and remember that consistent effort often leads to unexpected opportunities.

Jacqueline Sandoval

SENIOR HR MANAGER

Jacqueline Sandoval has always called Stockton home. After earning her bachelor's degree in human resources from California State University, Stanislaus and later completing her MBA, she joined Pacific Homecare Services as a recruiting intern and has grown into a leadership role. Today, she focuses on developing employees, strengthening workplace culture and helping others succeed. She encourages young professionals to step outside their comfort zones, embrace new opportunities and trust that growth comes from taking chances.

Alejandra Quevedo

ASSOCIATE HR MANAGER

Alejandra Quevedo's path to her career reflects resilience and determination. A graduate of Sacramento State University, she overcame unexpected challenges while finishing college before finding her place at Pacific Homecare Services. Although she does not live in Stockton, she was drawn to the organization's mission of improving the lives of local families. She finds purpose in helping clients maintain their independence while providing peace of mind to their loved ones. Her advice is to never underestimate the impact of kindness, compassion and simply showing up for others.

Each of these women followed a different path, but they share a common purpose: serving others. Their stories reflect the heart of Pacific Homecare Services and demonstrate how education, opportunity, and compassion can strengthen families, inspire future leaders and create lasting change in the place they call home. •

Michele L. Ostrowski

Owner of Tholborn & Ostrowski Accounting

BY MARY RAFFETTO

Twenty-two years ago, Michele Ostrowski, owner of Tholborn & Ostrowski Tax and Consulting Services, found her way into the profession when she answered an ad in the *Stockton Record* for an office manager/receptionist position in the office of Howard Crane, CPA. She immediately excelled in handling the responsibilities and soon discovered an inherent talent for managing the numbers and details of the bookkeeping department.

Recognizing her unusual aptitude, Howard urged her to go to school and become formally educated in the business. In addition to attending classes Michele continued seeing to the bookkeeping, managing the front desk and fielding questions from clients about various aspects of their finances. She began to notice a pattern. "I saw how terrified people were to go see their accountants. I found I was adept at explaining things to people and helping them feel better," she recalled. It's an aspect of her career that still brings Michele fulfillment and satisfaction.

With a master's degree in accounting and finance, Michele regularly consults with companies, helping them to make plans and decisions as a CEO or CFO would. "Smaller businesses can't afford a \$200,000 per year CEO, but they can afford to consult with someone who has that same ability," she explained. Michele also helps people set up businesses, guiding them and ensuring they avoid pitfalls. "Ninety-five percent of the time an LLC isn't what people assume it is," she cautioned. "Wherever a government filing is required, that's what we do."

In fact, the services at Tholborn & Ostrowski are so diverse and sophisticated that a visit to the company website is advised. She's not one to gatekeep useful information, so the FAQs provide important answers to a vast number of questions. Said Michele, "I believe in my clients, their ideas and their goals. My clients can trust me with whatever they are going through. If you lose a family member, we are here, like a life preserver, and we will help you navigate those hard times. We will get through it together."

Michele recalled a woman whose story is just a small-scale example of how she helps people overcome financial stress and overwhelm. "This woman's husband had died and she desperately needed help settling his estate. She had been to a tax preparer whose calculations resulted in a huge tax consequence of over \$100,000. A friend then put her in touch with me. Once I reviewed the numbers and organized them properly, it solved the problem and resulted in a substantial tax refund. She has been a client ever since."

Howard Crane always knew that when he retired, his protegee, Michele, would be the perfect person to take care of his long-term clients. "In 2014, after ten years of working together, knowing these clients one on one and overseeing every aspect of their tax and financial needs, I took over the business and that transition went very smoothly," she shared. Michele makes a point to speak to women's groups about finance, business and taxes because she knows all too well that this male-dominated field has not always made room for women.

Michelle is warm and caring with a down-to-earth demeanor, and her calling involves much more than numbers, tax law and business building. She tells her clients, "I'm great at what I do and I want to free you up to go do what you're great at. It's more of a partnership instead of just a business relationship. When my clients can stop worrying about taxes and finances and get back to doing what they love, that's when I know I've done my job." •

"Accounting and paying taxes aren't exactly known for being interesting tasks, but somehow they are to me, because of the people I am helping."

- Michele I. Ostrowski



Tholborn & Ostrowski

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Catherine Moss

PERSONAL INJURY ATTORNEY

Personal injury trial attorney Catherine Moss didn't grow up expecting to follow in her father's footsteps but that's exactly the direction she took after working for an LA-based law firm where she found herself deeply drawn to his specialty. Born in Stockton and raised in Linden, Catherine excelled in school, graduating from Linden High School where she was valedictorian and student body president. She went on to graduate from UCLA and then Southwestern Law School.

Now a partner at Knapp Moss Law, she reflects back on how her father, Larry Knapp, always set the bar high throughout his nearly three decade career. "Working at that law firm in LA really opened my eyes to how much my dad fought for the underdog," Catherine recalled. Witnessing the profound need people had to be well represented in some of life's most difficult circumstances, she chose to make personal injury law her specialty as well. Since then Catherine has tried cases before juries in San Joaquin and San Bernardino counties and won record-setting awards for her clients.

Part of her success is that Knapp Moss is a boutique law firm, meaning it's smaller and more specialized — although no less powerful — than bigger firms in the services they provide throughout San Joaquin County and the state of California. Catherine's brother, Howard, was so inspired that he decided to quit his job and go to law school too. "I never imagined working with my family, but in hindsight, I think I always would have ended up exactly where I am. Once I got into the legal field, joining forces with them just made the most sense," she observed.

"We are the office you call when you need us," Catherine elaborated. "With almost 30 years of experience, our boutique service is more fully attuned to the client, personalized, and well-rounded in our approach and services. Every client speaks directly with us, the actual attorneys, rather than being assigned to a case manager as happens at bigger



and national firms. We are very sensitive to taking care of our clients' medical and legal needs while making sure they are never left in the dark during the process."

This approach is crucial when that legal process can sometimes take 2 or more years to complete. Catherine advised, "In life, it takes time to do things right. Too often people are tempted to rush, but doing so can shortchange them. So we work to meet their needs but we take the time to perform our due diligence to ensure the best medical and financial outcome for them."

The partners at Knapp Moss agree that getting justice for their clients is the goal and usually comes in the form of financial compensation. But they also define success as fixing a dangerous situation by making changes which protect others from injury. For example, restructuring a dangerous parking lot to prevent people from suffering future acci-

dents or injuries was one of many such successes. Catherine noted, "I like to achieve policy changes and improved safety protocols. Anything we can do to make the world safer is our goal. It aids in getting justice for our clients."

For anyone who thinks they might have cause to file a personal injury lawsuit, Catherine urges, "If you've been injured through no fault of your own, just ask. Consult an attorney. We review every call to our office and provide free consultations. And if we aren't the correct office to meet someone's needs we will refer them to the right attorney or office. We just want to see people get the help they need."

Practicing personal injury law is a serious business but also a gratifying one. Catherine credits her career with enhancing her empathy toward other individuals. "It's absolutely changed me," she emphasized. "I am more empathetic across the board. The current lifestyle and culture of rushing everything causes a lot of problems. We need to watch out for one another. I am so grateful for our country's civil litigation system; the jury of our peers is a beautiful thing. It's a privilege to be part the civil justice system." ■

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Kristi Davis

CARING RESTORATIVE SPECIALIST

BY JO ANN KIRBY

Since she was a teen at Lodi High School, when she raced off the softball field to change clothes and head to the funeral home, Kristi Davis has worked in the death care industry as a magician of sorts, a specialist in the restorative arts.

Her day job as an embalmer serves an essential need in the

community as she carefully works to preserve and prepare the bodies of the deceased, whether for services including open casket viewings, funerals, burials and cremations. But these days, it's after work hours when the former standout high school and college softball player reverses course to change clothes and head

to the ballfield as a coach!

How was her interest in the funeral business piqued? The passing of her great grandmother when she was a teenager gave her pause. "I saw her in the hospital and then I saw her in the casket," Kristi said. "I wondered, 'Where did she go in between?'"

During a chance encounter with a professor who was teaching a class about job opportunities for women, Kristi learned the funeral business was one of a half dozen male-dominated professions in which women could succeed. "Kristi kept mentioning that it might be something she would be interested in and I said, 'Well, you don't even know if you could handle it. I don't know if I could,'" Sandy Culbertson, Kristi's mom, said.

Her curiosity prompted her mom to motivate her to get a job at a funeral home when she was a senior in high school. During her spring break, Sandy told Kristi to go for it. "It's not something, when you look at your little one, that you would ever think that they would go into," Sandy said. "But it's part of her heart."

Kristi visited all the funeral homes in Lodi and two weeks later, she got a call that there was a job for her. After softball practice, the shortstop player would throw on a dress and work visitations, answer phones or do laundry at Gierhart-Wells & Donahue Funeral Home in Lodi. During her stint there, she was asked if she would like to witness an embalming to see if it was something she might be interested in as a career. "It was very sad," she said. "It was an elderly couple who were in a car accident on their way to go vote."

What Kristi saw made her even more curious about the funeral profession. After a year at San Joaquin Delta College, she enrolled in Cypress College's mortuary science program, one of only two public community college programs in California to offer funeral service education. She juggled classes, worked at Paramount Mortuary, and played on the Cypress Chargers softball team that came in second in state in 1993.

"That was a great time in my life," she said. She was learning more about the funeral business, both through her coursework and at the mortuary, where she was tasked with going out in the middle of the night to retrieve the deceased. She became accustomed to seeing bodies in every state imaginable.

It would take a special combination of grit, muscle power and compassion along with the ability to read Thomas Guides, the old-school street maps drivers had to rely on before smart phone navigation, for the petite college student to meet the bereaved and lift their loved one's body onto a cart and put in the hearse or van. "I would go out on removals with another student and we would always discuss who would be the talker," she said of meeting the bereaved before taking their loved one away.

She has held every job possible in the industry, even serving as a deputy coroner. Throughout it all, her main mission has always been to preserve the body with care and prepare the body to an acceptable viewing state so that grieving families can pay their respects.

In 2005, the Lodi native opened Quality Mortuary Services LLC. As an independent, state-licensed embalmer, she works on a contract basis. For the past 26 years, she has been the embalmer at Park View Cemetery & Funeral Home in Manteca. "I can tell you she is amazing at her job. I have seen her work magic," Dave

Massey, owner and president of Park View, said, adding that she also manages and tracks all of the cases in the busy office.

Massey said Kristi is caring and tenacious. "There will be a decedent who we would assume just would not be viewable and she will say, let me see what I can do. Success to her is that a family can have a viewing," he said of Kristi's well-known talents in restorative arts. "Why is she so tenacious? Because she actually cares so much about being able to gift the family the chance to say goodbye in a way that will not shock them."

Her job includes embalming the body with formaldehyde, stitching autopsied bodies back together and more. "I'll come back prior to their visitation and do their hair and makeup, dress them and put them in their casket," she said.

She's so trusted in her profession that friends and family make sure she is the one to be the last to care for their loved ones. "She's really an artist. When she looks at someone, she really sees all the features in their face," Kristi's mom said. "She's quite the specialist and she's quite known throughout California. She really puts her heart into it."

What keeps her motivated and balanced in everyday life? "God, coffee and exercise," she said. "I couldn't do life without all three." The job isn't for the squeamish and she has even worked through three pregnancies. She is mother to two grown sons, Drake Davis, married Victoria, and Stryder Davis. Kristi's job can be demanding but she finds work-life balance by coaching her 13-year-old daughter Adeline's travel softball team, the Lodi Longhorns, spending time with her parents, riding horses and enjoying time on the Delta or the ski slopes. A family picture taken in July shows Kristi with all three of her children and daughter-in-law smiling broadly after the Lodi Longhorns won the first game they played as a team on the road in Elk Grove. "They were all there to support," she said proudly. Her job can be physically rigorous, being on her feet all day and lifting bodies, so it's important she stays fit as well.

According to DATA USA, just 33.1 percent of embalmers and funeral attendants in the U.S. were women in 2024. But while the 24/7 deathcare profession has traditionally been male dominated, as the Pacific professor once predicted to Kristi, that has certainly changed. In 2022, the graduating class of Cypress College's mortuary science program was 100 percent female. And according to the American Board of Funeral Service Education 2025 data report, more than 70 percent of graduates from funeral service programs in the United States are women.

In 2011, Kristi became the first woman to receive the Dick Fallbeck Funeral Director of the Year Award from the California Funeral Directors Association. The trailblazer mentors the next generation by speaking to students to show them her techniques, which have earned her widespread respect.

"A lot of people wouldn't guess the work I do," she said. "Even my softball players think I'm a kindergarten teacher or a flight attendant." On a first date, Kristi says she's a restorative artist and leaves it at that. "It's a challenge," she said of describing her profession. "If I say embalmer, they say 'Ick.'"

But she wouldn't change it for the world. "I really love my job. I love putting bodies back together for the families so that they can see their loved ones one last time," she said. ♦

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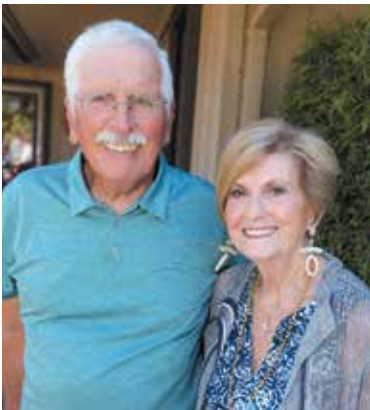
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HOSPICE OF SAN JOAQUIN GARDEN PARTY

Who doesn't love a beautiful garden setting to have a party? On July 25, 2026, The Stockton Butterfly Auxiliary of Hospice of San Joaquin hosted a garden party at a private estate. The event featured a social hour and a dinner prepared by the Central Valley Men's Club. Live entertainment was provided by The Help. ♦

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HELEN RIPKEN



Celebrating Connie Fox

96 YEARS YOUNG AND 25 YEARS OF GIVING BACK



This year, we proudly celebrate Connie Fox, our oldest active volunteer, as she turns 96 years young.

Connie began volunteering with Hospice of San Joaquin in 2001, after our hospice cared for her husband. She was invited by Julie Lofy, the volunteer manager at the time, to volunteer and was inspired by the compassionate care her husband, Don, received, especially from his nurse, Kristi Lobb. Connie chuckles and fondly remembers that on the days Kristi visited, Don insisted on combing his own hair so he would look presentable for her.

What began as a way to simply give back has become more than 25 years of dedicated service. Over the years, Connie has volunteered in the office, represented and promoted our organization at community outreach events, supported special events and assisted with bereavement services.

When asked why she continues to volunteer, Connie's answer is simple. "The satisfaction. I've loved every minute of it." She greatly treasures the relationships she's built with staff, many of whom keep in touch with her long after moving on from the organization. "We are family. I love Hospice of San Joaquin," she said. The feeling is mutual.

Connie's daughter, Diana Costa, learned the value of volun-

teering by watching her mother and she now celebrates 11 years of service and more than 3,500 volunteer hours with Hospice of San Joaquin. "It's great to help others. Ask how you can help. Be open to help with different tasks and in different areas," Connie said of her advice to anyone considering volunteering.

At 96, Connie continues to embrace life with enthusiasm. She creates beautiful gem artwork that takes two weeks at a time to complete and she makes uplifting pocket crosses to encourage others spiritually. She firmly believes that staying involved and positive is the key to a fulfilling life.

"Keep your hobbies. Stay busy and don't feel sorry for yourself. Be positive and grateful. Stay in touch with your friends and family," Connie said. She practices what she preaches. Connie still has lunch with her schoolmates; one is from the first grade, two from grammar school and the rest are from high school.

Connie reminds us that you can make a difference at any age. By serving others and teaching our children the importance of giving back, we create stronger, more compassionate communities. Her life is a beautiful example that kindness, purpose and service never grow old.

Happy 96th Birthday, Connie, and thank you for more than 25 years of inspiring us all. •

Hospice of San Joaquin supports terminally ill patients and their caregivers and offers bereavement services and programs. Hospice of San Joaquin is located at 3888 Pacific Avenue, Stockton, California 95204. To learn about volunteer opportunities with Hospice of San Joaquin or to donate, please visit our website, hospicesj.org, or call (209) 957-3888.

HOSPICE
of **SAN JOAQUIN**



JULIA ELIZABETH

Reflecting Julia Cardona's Vision



BY JO ANN KIRBY | PHOTOS BY JULIA AND CHRISTIAN CARDONA

Julia Cardona, a graduate of Saint Mary's High School and University of the Pacific, is the owner of Julia Elizabeth, a boutique clothing, home decor and gift store, with locations at 906 N. Yosemite Street in Stockton at 46 Main Street in Sutter Creek. Julia Elizabeth just celebrated its two-year anniversary in Stockton; the newer Sutter Creek location launched in February. For Julia, her business venture is a way to build community with her customers, friends and family. Follow her on Instagram @shopjuliaelizabeth, on Facebook at Julia Elizabeth Boutique or online, shopjuliaelizabeth.com.

Q: How would you describe your stores?

A: Julia Elizabeth is a boutique centered around timeless style, thoughtful details and creating a space where people can step away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, slow down and enjoy a moment for themselves. Today, we curate clothing, home décor, books and gifts that reflect that vision with a focus on timeless style, thoughtful details, and finding beauty in everyday life. One of my favorite parts of Julia Elizabeth has been watching it grow into a community. Through our monthly book club, events and collaborations with other local small businesses, we've had the opportunity to bring people together in ways I nev-

er imagined. My hope is that everyone who visits one of our boutiques or shops with us online leaves feeling inspired, welcomed and a little more connected than when they arrived.

Q: How do you determine what clothing to carry each season?

A: Buying for Julia Elizabeth is a thoughtful process of combing through our favorite brands' seasonal collections while also understanding what our customers are looking for. Although I pay attention to current trends, my goal has always been to curate a collection that feels timeless. I want our customers to invest in pieces they can style in multiple ways, whether they're heading to work, meeting friends for dinner, or enjoying a weekend away. I consider everything from the cut of a blouse and the shape of a sleeve to how a piece will fit different body types and whether it will resonate with women across generations. Every buying season is about finding the right balance. I love discovering unique pieces with beautiful colors, textures and unexpected details, but I also know the value of an effortless striped tee, a perfectly cozy sweater or those classic wardrobe staples that never go out of style. Clothing is an investment, and I never take that lightly. Every piece we bring into Julia Elizabeth is something I believe is worthy of our customers, not just because it's beautiful today but

because I hope it will become something they reach for and love for years to come.

Q: How do you find such unique gift pieces?

A: I approach our gift collection the same way I approach our clothing. I have always loved little treasures, beautiful stationery, whimsical trinkets and keepsakes that make someone stop and smile. My favorite pieces are often the ones people originally pick up as a gift for someone else, only to decide they can't leave without one for themselves. One of the things I'm most proud of is that many of our gift items come from small businesses, including women-owned brands and makers right here in California. I'm constantly searching for unique pieces that feel special and tell a story because Julia Elizabeth is, in many ways, a reflection of who I am and the things I love. Our collection is inspired by makers from around the world, with pieces sourced from East Asia, Europe and beyond. One of our newest arrivals is a collection of art prints by a female oil painter based in Nottingham, England, and I love knowing each new discovery brings a little more character to the shop.

Q: What is your day job at University of the Pacific?

A: I work in the Development and Alumni Relations department at University of the Pacific as the assistant director for alumni engagement. My role allows me to wear a variety of hats, which is one of the things I enjoy most. I oversee many of our alumni marketing and communications efforts, including social media strategy, email marketing, digital storytelling and promotional campaigns. I also help plan and market alumni events, produce content that highlights the incredible stories of our graduates, and serve as the staff liaison for several of our affinity clubs and the Pacific Alumni Association Board. Every day is a little different, but at the heart of my work is building meaningful connections and helping our alumni stay engaged with the university long after graduation.

Q: What has been the biggest challenge of being a small business owner?

A: Learning how to carry the weight of being responsible for something that means so much to me. As a small business owner, there is no clocking out. You're constantly thinking about the next collection, upcoming events, marketing, finances, customer experience and all of the behind-the-scenes details that most people never see. It can feel overwhelming at times because you care so deeply about what you're building.

Q: What has this experience taught you?

A: Starting Julia Elizabeth from the ground up has been one of the greatest learning experiences of my life. You quickly realize that owning a business means learning every part of it from the inside out. There have been moments when I've made mistakes, had to pivot or learned lessons the hard way, but I think that's part of entrepreneurship. Every challenge has made me a better business owner and taught me something I couldn't have learned any other way. At the end of the day, I keep showing up because I genuinely love what I do. Building Julia Elizabeth has taught me

that growth rarely happens overnight. It's about creating something meaningful, continuing to learn and celebrating each step along the way.

Q: What has been the biggest blessing of being a small business owner?

A: Discovering strengths I didn't know I had and recognizing the incredible love and support of my family and friends, who have been by my side every step of the way.

Q: How will you define success as a business owner?

A: To me, success is creating a community of customers who continue to come back year after year and allowing Julia Elizabeth to become a small part of their lives. The best part of owning this business has always been the people. I love getting to know our customers, hearing about the moments they're shopping for, helping someone find an outfit they feel great in, or picking out the perfect gift for someone they love. Those everyday conversations and connections are what make this job so meaningful. If someone leaves our shop feeling a little happier than when they walked in, then I consider that a success. My hope is that Julia Elizabeth continues to be a place where people feel welcomed, inspired and excited to come back to for years to come.

Q: Tell us about your employees.

A: We are a family-owned and -operated business, and that is one of my favorite parts of Julia Elizabeth. Most days you'll find my mom, Elizabeth (Liz), at the shop, and when she's not there, it's me. She is the reason I'm able to balance both of my careers and she has been an integral part of this journey from the very beginning. She has an incredible eye for styling and a true gift for helping customers find exactly what they're looking for. You'll even find her handmade jewelry in both of our locations. From time to time, you'll also find my sister, Christian, at the shop, and you may recognize her from our social media. She helps bring Julia Elizabeth to life through content creation and modeling many of our newest arrivals.

Q: How do you destress?

A: Taking care of myself has become really important because I've learned that creativity isn't endless. When I start to feel burned out, I know it's time to step away for a bit so I can come back feeling refreshed. If I want Julia Elizabeth to be something I can continue building for years to come, I have to make taking care of myself a priority. I love staying active, whether that's taking a Pilates or Orangetheory class or getting back out on the tennis court just for fun. Reading has also become one of my favorite ways to unwind. It's such a wonderful escape, and starting the Julia Elizabeth Book Club has been one of the best decisions because it has given me the chance to share that love of reading with others. I always encourage people to find a book that pulls them into another world for a little while. Every so often, my family and I will take a day trip or plan a bigger adventure. Visiting new places, exploring small towns and simply stepping away from our everyday routine always leaves me feeling inspired and ready to come back with fresh ideas. ♦

BANQUET RECOGNIZES OUTSTANDING STUDENTS

The LULAC Stockton Council 2060 celebrated its 50th Annual Scholarship Awards Banquet and recognized outstanding students for their hard work, leadership and academic achievement. The special evening honored the next generation of leaders while celebrating five decades of supporting education in the community. It took place Saturday, August 1, 2026, at the Stockton Hilton. ♦

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HELEN RIPKEN





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STEM Champion

Bella Githere is a core member of the STEM programs team. She is ever-present, innovative, and full of spark for those interested in learning about STEM. From students and student events to professional learning opportunities for educators and her role as an adjunct professor at the Teachers College of San Joaquin, it's clear that Bella is passionate about her work.

When asked what inspires her, Bella shared, "the teachers who come to professional learning sessions ready to learn, stay engaged, and take back the most impactful lesson to their students."

This last school year, Bella was instrumental in facilitating the inaugural County Operated Schools and Programs STEM Showcase. This event was the first time some of the students had an education experience where they were positively showcased. It's this type of partnership and innovation that highlights Bella's strengths as a leader, colleague, and educator.

Bella Githere

Coordinator
STEM, Workforce Development, and Innovation



Creativity Leads the Way

If you have ever attended a countywide student event, chances are high that you have crossed paths with Michelle Hicks. Working within the Student Engagement and the Arts department, Hicks coordinates and facilitates key academic competitions across the region, including the Science Olympiad, the County Spelling Bee, and the Academic Decathlon.

Her dedication extends beyond traditional academic subjects. Michelle actively plans and supports the popular Color the Summer Art Camp, which serves creative third through eighth graders throughout the entire county.

"Supporting students and engaging them with what they are passionate about is important," Michelle shared. "It validates their strengths and lets them know their talents are truly valued."

When she is not busy empowering student creativity, Michelle enjoys spending time outdoors and traveling with her husband and three children.

Michelle Hicks

Coordinator
Student Engagement and the Arts



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Compassionate Connector

Sophary Sam has dedicated her career to serving others, inspired by her mother's resilience as a Cambodian refugee who sacrificed to build a better life for her family. She has an extensive background working with children and youth across San Joaquin County. Currently, Sophary is a school counselor at Come Back Kids, an educational program that is offered through the SJCOE's County Operated Schools and Programs division that can help anyone 18 years and older earn their high school diploma.

"CBK provides more than an education," Sophary shared. "We offer a safe haven where students feel valued, supported, and understood. By building trusting relationships, we create an environment where students want to continue showing up, even when life presents challenges."

Sophary's compassion and collaborative nature ensure her students - no matter their age - are on track to transform their lives.

Sophary Sam

Counselor
Come Back Kids



Distinguished Leader

With over 26 years of dedicated service at the San Joaquin County Office of Education (SJCOE), Yvette deeply understands the organization's inner workings. She is committed to equipping SJCOE programs and staff with the resources they need to create meaningful opportunities for students, educators, and the broader community.

"Everything we do at the SJCOE is to serve our students and our community," Yvette shared. A member of the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access steering committee, Warren also believes equity embedded in our policies and practices is key to meeting needs- from employee travel to procuring essential goods and services.

Outside of her professional achievements, Yvette enjoys spending time with her husband, three children, and eight grandchildren. Her favorite time of year is Christmas, which brings her family together for holiday traditions and baking.

Yvette Warren

Coordinator
Operations

REACHING FOR THE STARS 20TH GALA

Jose Hernandez Reaching for the Stars Foundation 20th Gala and Scholarship Awards was held August 14, 2026, at the University Plaza Waterfront Hotel in Stockton. The foundation's mission is "to inspire youth to find passion in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education, establish a family commitment to education and develop a support network through community engagement." Jose Hernandez is an astronaut who served aboard the space shuttle. He grew up in the Stockton area. ♦

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HELEN RIPKEN





STOP OVER-EXPLAINING:

The CEO Email Formula Every Powerful Woman Needs

BY KIMBERLEY BORGENS

CEO, PODCAST HOST, SPEAKER, COACH, AUTHOR

In today's fast-paced business environment, effective leadership is often measured by the clarity of communication. Yet many high-achieving women unknowingly undermine their authority through a habit that feels helpful but can be costly: over-explaining.

Leadership strategist Kimberley Borgens explores why so many women add extra explanations, qualifiers and apologies to their emails before hitting send. While these additions are often intended to be thoughtful and professional, they can dilute a message and weaken executive presence.

The tendency to soften communication is rarely a lack of confidence or competence. Rather, it is often the result of years of conditioning that encourages women to make others comfortable, avoid conflict and justify decisions more than their male counterparts. The result is longer emails filled with unnecessary context, cautious language and apologies for issues that require none.

There are three common email habits that make capable professional women appear less confident than they are, while demonstrating how concise

communication builds credibility and trust.

1. Over-Explaining
2. Pre-Apologizing
3. Emotional Cushioning

Learn more when you listen to Episode 59 of Superheroes In Heels Podcast to also learn Kimberley's CEO Email Formula—a simple framework designed to help leaders communicate with greater confidence, authority and efficiency.

The core message is one every business leader should remember: people do not trust leaders because they write longer emails. They trust leaders because they communicate clearly.

Whether communicating with clients, employees or colleagues, the most effective leaders focus on clarity over comfort. When your message is direct, intentional and unmistakably clear, your leadership becomes impossible to ignore. •

Listen to Superheroes In Heels with Kimberley Borgens in your favorite podcast app or to learn more and get podcast transcripts, visit KimberleyBorgens.com.



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Your Home, Your Choice: Hite Home Lending

BY RACHEL FENTON

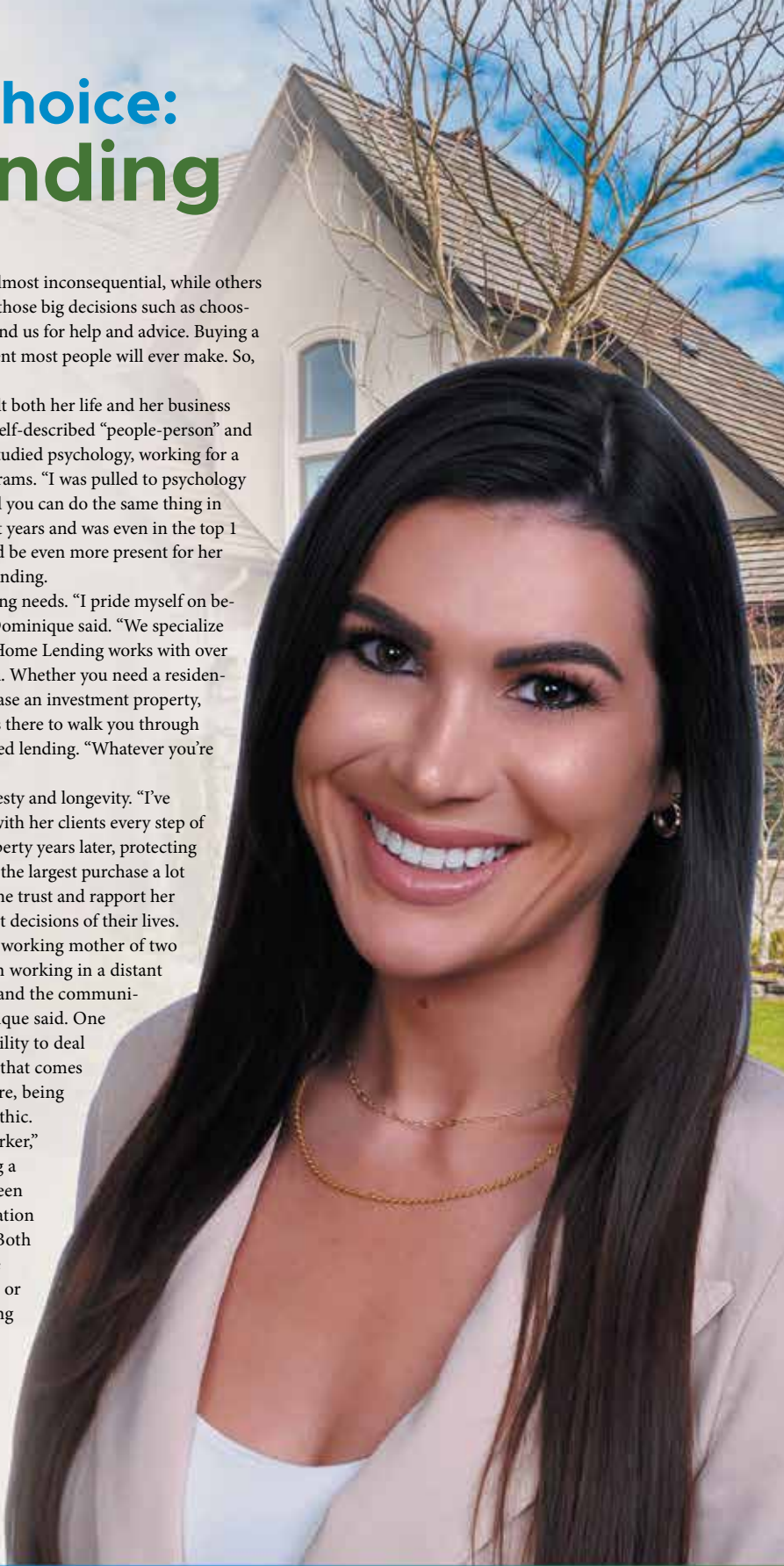
Our lives are defined by the choices we make. Some are small and almost inconsequential, while others have the power to change our lives completely. When it comes to those big decisions such as choosing a life partner or a vocational path, we often turn to those around us for help and advice. Buying a home is one such decision. It's not a mere purchase; it's the largest investment most people will ever make. So, who will you turn to when choosing your forever home?

Dominique Hite-Khourdaji is no stranger to big decisions. She has built both her life and her business around helping people take advantage of their best available options. As a self-described "people-person" and someone with a big heart for her local community, Dominique originally studied psychology, working for a real estate company as a loan originator while she applied for masters programs. "I was pulled to psychology because of the impact you can make on somebody," she said. "But I realized you can do the same thing in real estate and finance." Dominique worked for the same company for eight years and was even in the top 1 percent of United Wholesale Mortgage brokers. Then she realized she could be even more present for her community by using her expertise to start her own business, Hite Home Lending.

Hite Home Lending is a one-stop shop for all of the community's lending needs. "I pride myself on being someone that someone can come to and they don't get turned down," Dominique said. "We specialize not only in the A to Z, but we do a lot of unconventional things too." Hite Home Lending works with over 20 different lenders and many different programs to find the best fit for you. Whether you need a residential mortgage as an aspiring first-time homeowner, you're looking to purchase an investment property, or if you're self-employed looking into business loan options, Dominique is there to walk you through all the available options and make their own investments through specialized lending. "Whatever you're looking for, we can figure it out," she said.

Dominique's relationship with her clients is defined by excellence, honesty and longevity. "I've worked with some buyers for five to almost ten years," she said. She walks with her clients every step of the way, from their first homes as newlyweds to their third investment property years later, protecting and growing their investments for their young children. "Buying a home is the largest purchase a lot of people are going to do in their life," Dominique said, and she cherishes the trust and rapport her clients place in her as she walks alongside them through some of the biggest decisions of their lives.

There is a sense of peace in knowing your loan originator is the hard-working mother of two who visits the same grocery stores and gyms as you, not a businesswoman working in a distant office who just sees you as another number or metric. "The relationships and the community are what I've really looked for and built through this business," Dominique said. One of the things she loves the most about running her own business is the ability to deal with every aspect of the job herself. "I love being able to handle anything that comes to me" she said. "It's not the same thing every day." And her newest venture, being a mother of two under three, has only increased her drive and her work ethic. "I always want my kids to look at me and see that their mom is a hard worker," Dominique said. "I want them to see what commitment looks like, having a goal and being able to work toward it." She finds a lot of similarities between motherhood and running her own business; they both take selfless dedication and work, and, most of all, showing up daily with every part of yourself. Both are a journey of self-growth, and she is excited to see where they will take her. Whether you're just beginning your own journey of home ownership or you are looking to expand and grow your investments, Hite Home Lending is there for you as a listening ear, a staunch advocate and a companion through life's biggest decisions. ■



Dominique Hite-Khourdaji
NMLS: 1775085 | DRE: 02195058

THE WILLIE AWARDS

With a nod to William Shakespeare, the Stockton Civic Theatre celebrated its 72nd Willie Awards for the 2025-2026 season. The event included appetizers, a champagne toast and dessert at the theater on August 1, 2026. Lead actors and actresses from productions of *The Wedding Singer*, *Anastasia*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Bug*, *The Nance* and *Grand Horizons* were nominated for awards and there were nominations in other categories as well. The event also serves as a celebration for a great season. ♦

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HELEN RIPKEN



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The Stockton Symphony Orchestra performing at the Stockton High School Auditorium.



*L-R: Carlotta Silva,
Francesca Silva Vera and
Manlio Silva*



*Manlio Silva during rehearsal
at the Stockton High School
auditorium.*

**Celebrating the extraordinary vision and legacy of
my uncle and symphony founder, Manlio Silva**

Francesca (Silva) and John Vera

THE POWER OF HARMONY

THE CENTENNIAL GALA FOR UNITED WAY AND THE STOCKTON SYMPHONY

BY RACHEL FENTON

Often our world feels dissonant. The clashes and chaos among people and nations take center stage, overpowering everything else and making peace seem far away. However, when we turn our gaze toward our local community, we can find places where harmony overcomes the dissonance, bringing people together and rising above the conflict.

This year, two organizations that have brought harmony to our local community celebrate their centennial anniversaries: the Stockton Symphony and United Way. Instead of hosting separate celebrations, they have decided to come together, highlighting their similarities in an unforgettable gala that shows both their gratitude to the community that has supported them for the past 100 years and the zealous joy that drives them forward to last for another century to come.

The connection between United Way and the Stockton Symphony may not be immediately apparent, but for Maestro Peter Jaffe of the Stockton Symphony and Kristen Birtwhistle, the CEO of United Way, nothing could be more fitting. “We’re a convener; we bring people together for change. We invest and build nonprofits so they can



MAESTRO PETER JAFFE



KIRSTEN BIRTWHISTLE

serve the community,” Kristen said as she explained their mission. United Way has been carrying out their mission of “mobilizing the caring power of the community” since 1926, bringing together funds and community support for a vast number of organizations, including Hospice of San Joaquin, El Concilio, the 180 Teen Center in Lodi and more. “Our symphony is the ability to make nonprofits sing and

soar,” Kristen said with a laugh as she compared the Stockton Symphony and United Way. “Peter is in the art of music, and I’m in the art of service.”

Almost everyone knows what a symphony is and what it does to some degree, but its deeper purpose thrums beneath the obvious. There is a mystical element to music; it awakens inside of us things that cannot be put into words, complex blends of emotions that range from cathartic to transcendent. Live performance enhances the experience, introducing a vibrant synergy in which the whole becomes so much more than the sum of its parts, laced with the thrilling risk of musicians playing in real time without the safety net of autotune or editing. That type of performance takes a group of individuals and unites them in a

blend of harmony and emotion that cannot be experienced anywhere else. “The basic ethos of what we do is bring people into a concert hall to take them out of the day-to-day troubles of their world and have this vicarious adventure thrill,” Peter said. “Our mission is to inspire joy and build community through the magic of music.”

The two organizations have collaborated with each other throughout the years in various ways, including United Way’s providing meeting space for the Stockton Symphony’s board meetings. “The association between the symphony and United Way goes back decades,” Peter said. “It’s coming to fruition in the anniversary celebration.” Their joint centennial gala will happen on September 26, and it’s slated to be a celebration worthy of their 100 years.

Kristen and Peter will emcee it together, sharing their own personal touches and years of experience with the audience. It will be hosted at the River Mill, a beautiful building with a history to rival both the Symphony’s and United Way’s, the ambiance amplifying the history and elegance of their celebrated century. “It’s a gala in the true old-fashioned term of what a gala means, a very elaborate and wonderful party, a huge celebration that really is quite unusual in its collaboration,” Peter said. They describe it as an “unforgettable” evening, with fantastic food and drink and a variety of high-class musical entertainment. The gala celebrates not only their longstanding presence in the community, but the community itself, which has shown its



DONNA NG



FRANCESCA VERA

steadfast support since their founding. In particular, United Way will be recognizing Donna Ng, who has worked with them for 50 years, making her the longest-serving employee of the organization worldwide. The Stockton Symphony will be recognizing Francesca Vera, the niece of their founding conductor, Manlio Silva, and showing their gratitude for her lifelong support of their work and mission.

As the Stockton Symphony and United Way reflect on their past 100 years and prepare for the centennial gala, they also look ahead to the future with hope. “What we’re doing together is much more powerful than what we could do by ourselves,” Kristen said. “Innovation is important; we have to be built to last for the next century.”

Peter agreed, reflecting on how the ability to grow has ensured the Symphony’s continued success. “We continue to evolve and reinvent ourselves, but at the same time, not in such a radical way we lose our way,” said Peter. To stand the test of time, the roots of tradition must be nourished along with the evolution of growth, and the Stockton Symphony and United Way stand as testaments to that. “We don’t have enough music, we don’t have enough partnerships,” Kristen said. Their collaboration over their centennial anniversaries is a testament to their commitment to bring harmony to our local community and to the world. And as long as community comes together to support the things that combat chaos and are built to last, the dissonance in our world will fade to the power of harmony. ♦

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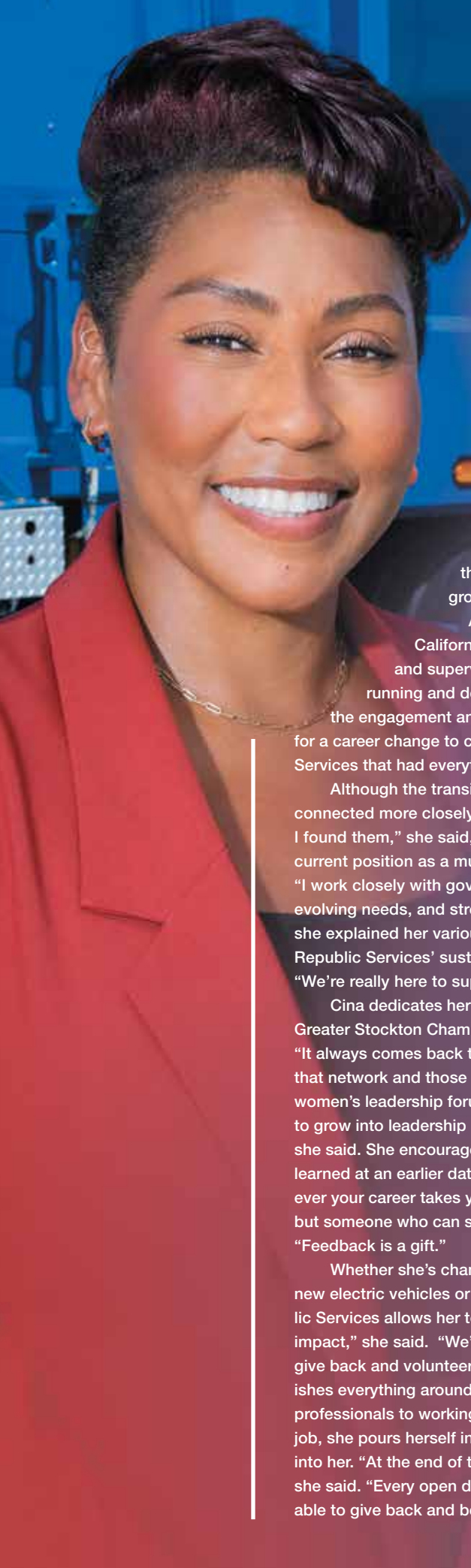
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A portrait of Cina Thompson, a woman with short, dark, curly hair, smiling. She is wearing a red blazer and a gold chain necklace. The background is a blue wall with some equipment.

A NOURISHING PRESENCE

Cina Thompson

by Rachel Fenton

Nothing grows without nourishment. A garden needs water and healthy soil, a child needs care from those around them, and even a city needs people who come together to support its infrastructure and community. Careers are no different – they flourish best through mentorship. Cina Thompson has a successful career that over its course spanned two different industries, but to her, the mentorship she's both given and received is the most impactful part of her job. "Those have been my proudest moments...being able to pour into others. I'm so grateful to be able to have the opportunity to do that," she said. She also humbly credits many of her accomplishments to the support of her managers and mentors. "I had so many people who took time to help me grow," she said. "Mentorship has been huge in my success."

A life-long Stocktonian, Cina began her career as a call representative for Blue Shield of California, and from there began growing into leadership roles at the encouragement of colleagues and supervisors. She ended up being a manager for their Medicare clients, keeping her department running and developing strong relationships with their clients and staff alike. "[What] I loved the most was the engagement and the relationship and the community aspect of things," she said. When she began looking for a career change to continue expanding and growing her professional skills, a position opened up at Republic Services that had everything she was looking for in a new job, and she accepted immediately.

Although the transition from health care to waste management might seem strange to some, the two are connected more closely than one might think. "I'm passionate about leaving people and spaces better than when I found them," she said, something that both healthcare and waste management services have in common. Her current position as a municipal manager encompasses many different skillsets, most of them communally focused. "I work closely with government officials, leaders, businesses, and the community to meet the increasing and evolving needs, and strengthen those relationships so we can together make a meaningful impact," she said as she explained her various duties. "Trash is a whole lot more than garbage," she added with a laugh. She also loves Republic Services' sustainability initiatives with their electric vehicle fleet and recently expanded organics facility. "We're really here to support the communities that we service...to leave a positive impact," she said.

Cina dedicates her personal time to bettering the community as well, working as an ambassador for the Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce, and on the board of directors for the San Joaquin Builders Exchange. "It always comes back to community," she said simply. "It takes a joint effort. We can't do it all on our own. Having that network and those relationships is so important." Recently, Cina spoke at the Leadership Training Institute on a women's leadership forum, and one of the most important pieces of advice she gave to young professionals hoping to grow into leadership roles was simple yet profound: "Don't confuse being uncomfortable with being unqualified," she said. She encouraged young professionals to learn to advocate for themselves – something she wishes she had learned at an earlier date in her own career. And she emphasized the importance of finding good mentorship wherever your career takes you, using her own experiences as examples. "It's not about finding someone that's perfect, but someone who can share their successes and their lessons...and who will ask the tough questions," Cina said. "Feedback is a gift."

Whether she's championing city-wide clean-ups or planning elementary school visits for career day with their new electric vehicles or teaching high schoolers the various stages of compost, Cina loves that her job with Republic Services allows her to give back to the city at every opportunity. "I'm thankful to be in a space that can make an impact," she said. "We're more than just a service provider – [we're] a contributing member of the community. We give back and volunteer...we're happy to help and want to be able to serve however we can." Cina's presence nourishes everything around her. From counseling and mentoring young professionals to working to meet the needs of the city through her job, she pours herself into the community that has poured so much into her. "At the end of the day, I'm grateful for every opportunity," she said. "Every open door, every new connection, I'm grateful to be able to give back and be a blessing to somebody else." •



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Amplifying Voices...

MISHELLE AGUILA AND THE CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION COUNCIL OF SAN JOAQUIN

By Rachel Fenton

Everyone has a voice, but not every voice is heard. Some need a person to listen to them to show them their voice is worth hearing. Others need to be taught how to speak up, coached through the difficult conversations and empowered to advocate for themselves. We need people who come alongside our unheard youth, helping them face the challenges of adulthood with strong voices.

Mishelle Aguila has dedicated her entire career to supporting our county's children and given her time and expertise to the Child Abuse Prevention Council of San Joaquin, or CAPC, for nearly a decade. As a youth services program manager, she has come alongside children and young adults of all ages in several different capacities. "I love this agency," Mishelle said. "We're here to help support and keep our families and our communities safe."

From a young age, Mishelle knew she'd be dedicating her life to making lives better. "I always knew as a child I wanted to help people," she said. After she graduated high school, she began to work with the school district as she pursued her degree and teaching credentials. She loved interacting with the students in her day-to-day work. "I often found myself supporting them in more of their social and emotional needs," she said. Instead of just helping them with homework and study skills, she was coaching them through hard conversations and learning how to advocate for themselves. "I love seeing when things click for them; when they start to see for themselves the autonomy that they've built and the empowerment they display when they start to advocate for themselves, when they realize their voice means something," she said. She saw the great need for more mental health support in education and the school system, and realized she could fill that need. Mishelle shifted her focus from early childhood education and toward mental health support, graduating with her bachelor's degree in human services, a flexible degree that opened up a lot of career options for her and led her to the CAPC in 2017. As she was interviewing for a family advocate position, they asked her if she'd be interested in a different position, working in their new Suicide Prevention program. After a moment's pause, she accepted.



The serendipity of the offer was not lost on her. As a teenager in high school, Mishelle lost her own father to suicide. "That was part of the motivation, understanding my own experience and talking with the kids I'd worked with for ten years," she said. "It was a full circle moment for me, to be able to go out into our community and help support youth in need and provide services." Her own experience with the weight of grief lent her a unique edge. "I walked that walk. I have gone through these challenges. I empathize," she said. "It was very, very impactful for me to provide that support." She went throughout high schools in the county providing one-on-one support, hosting on-campus groups for coping skills and leading trainings and presentations to raise awareness and help parents learn the warning signs of suicidality, coming alongside youth in some of their darkest struggles. "I like to say 'alongside' with them," Mishelle clarified. "Because I'm not ahead of them, I'm not behind them, I want to take every step along with them as best I can." Her commitment to walking alongside youth remained constant, empowering them to build confidence, strengthen their voices, and develop the skills needed for a successful transition into adulthood. Through her work with Transition-Age Youth (TAY), she provided coaching, mentorship, advocacy, and guidance as young people navigated education, employment, independent living, and personal challenges.

Mishelle still finds ways in her leadership role to continually offer support to those around her, whether that's encouraging her staff after a difficult day or organizing community events such as their Walk 4 Life in September to raise awareness for suicide prevention. "Being able to hold a space in our community for mental health awareness and support, I want to do it as often as I can," she said. The essential work that CAPC does is often heavy, but Mishelle always focuses on the end goal, the quiet, steady work of listening and supporting that helps bring people from darkness into light.

"We have all our voices," she said, and as the Child Abuse Prevention Council continues to evolve and grow, Mishelle will be there to walk alongside her staff and her community and help the voiceless find their voice. •

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SOPHIE

Sweet & Spicy

GUARDIAN



BY HERLIFE STAFF

Q: What is your name?

A: Sophie. I am a golden doodle.

Q: How would you describe your personality?

A: I am very spicy. I greet everyone at the door with a happy, twirl dance!

Q: What is your favorite thing to do in your free time?

A: I love to watch for any action.

Q: Do you have a guilty pleasure?

A: Yes, I love snuggling with my favorite humans. I also love to wear my pearls.

Q: What was the naughtiest deed you did as a pup?

A: I loved to get in the Christmas ribbons and get all tangled up.

Q: What is your biggest obsession right now?

A: Being the best watch dog. I also like to chase cats.

Q: What is your favorite, most wonderful treat?

A: I love apples and will come running if I hear one being sliced up.

Q: What is your favorite way to relax?

A: Sleeping on the couch with one eye open.

Q: What would you like for everyone to know about you?

A: I like to float on the raft in the pool, so I can be with the swimming grandkids!

Q: What is your most amazing skill or talent?

A: I love to chase squirrels, birds, ducks and lizards.

Q: What do you like to do to be pampered?

A: I love to get a good belly rub. I will tolerate being groomed!

Q: What makes you have the zoomies?

A: At 8:30 p.m. every night, I go crazy and I just have to run. I have to get my wiggles out!

Q: Where were you born?

A: Winton, California.

Q: Who are your parents?

A: Kurt and Kaye Blakely of Stockton. ♦

APL UNLEASHED POKER RUN 2026

The Animal Protection League held its annual Unleashed Poker Run with two routes in Stockton and Discovery Bay for boaters on July 17, 2026. The fantastic day on the Delta is a fundraiser and featured live music, cash prizes and awards, food, refreshments, raffles and a silent auction. Proceeds from the event help fund affordable spay/neuter services and lifesaving care for local animals. ♦

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HELEN RIPKEN





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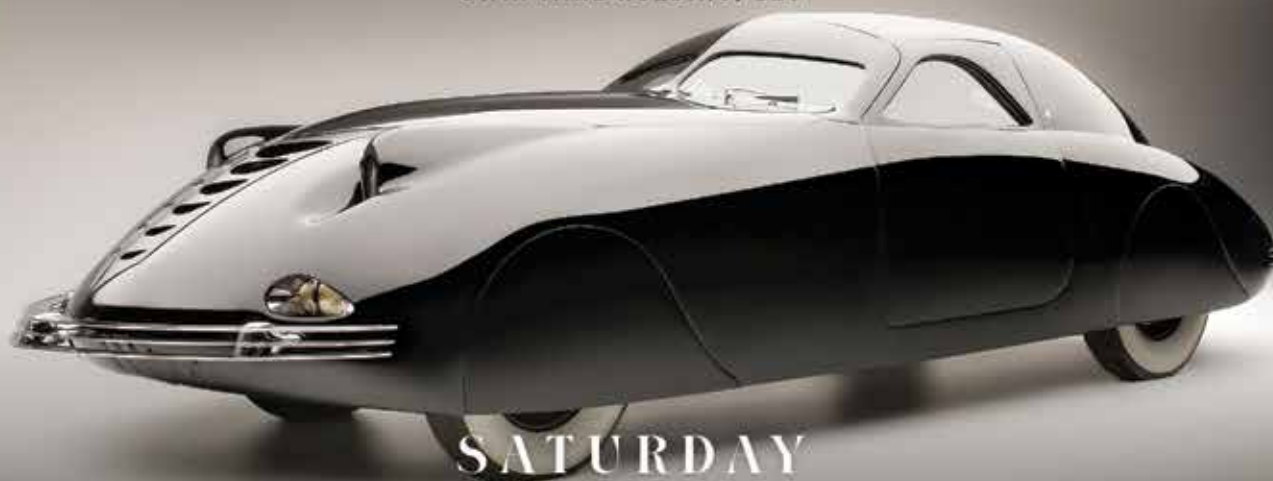
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LET THE MUSIC MOVE YOU

Whiskey Kiss: Magic in the Music

BY TIM DALY

The popular local country band Whiskey Kiss might not even be in existence if it weren't for a fussy baby many years ago that just wouldn't stop crying. Band leader Dave Massey was the father of that newborn girl, ready to try anything for a little peace and quiet.

"My dad had gifted me a guitar but I had zero interest in it; it was in the closet. I was 20 when I had my daughter and she cried constantly. One night, sitting on the couch, I strummed the one guitar chord my dad taught me, and she immediately stopped. I strummed the heck out of that one chord," said Massey.

Dave saw the magic music could produce and bought a chord book to expand his knowledge beyond that one chord (It was a C.). Then a few years later, sitting in a Stockton church, his wife encouraged him to join the musicians on stage and that weekly gig would last more than ten years.

Dave was hooked on playing, and being a 1985 high school graduate, it only made sense to be in a band performing classic rock. But he also appreciated the storytelling of country legends like Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson and George Strait, and when a friend brought him on board to be in a country band instead, the path was set. That's where he was told to sing lead on a couple of songs and the confidence grew that he could do this on his own.

Several years later, Dave has his own country band, Whiskey Kiss, playing one to three times a week around San Joaquin County. They'd play more gigs if it wasn't for real jobs that tend to fill up the rest of their schedules.

"I'm okay at singing, and okay at being a frontman, and okay at being a rhythm guitar player, but I surround myself with people much better than me," said Dave, who is being way too modest. With Rich Mason on bass, Dave Mompean on drums and the multi-instrumentalist Peter Morgan handling lead guitar, steel guitar and harmonica, Whiskey Kiss delivers tight arrangements with impressive musicianship. "I surround myself with those people because we have a good time performing together, everybody is an excellent musician and we have zero band drama."

Dave didn't add there's a slight resemblance to Kenny Chesney, and he's not opposed to getting off the stage and rubbing shoulders with the crowd. "A lot of bands just stand there and play but we really try to engage with people. There are times where I'll get off the stage and go dance the electric slide with people or I'll take the microphone off the stage and sing a song down in the crowd," said Dave. "Other times we'll ask the crowd to sing so I'm off mic and they take over the lyrics. The feedback we get is, you guys are so fun."

Getting back to the topic of real jobs, Dave's might be the most unusual among guys who run a talented local band. "I'm a fu-



SAVE THE DATE

UPCOMING WHISKEY KISS PERFORMANCES

September 5: Windmill Cove Resort

October 2: Rio Vista Bass Festival

October 17: Jessie's Grove Winery

neral guy. I operate cemeteries, funeral homes and crematories." His mom married into the industry when Dave was a young adult, and with bills piling up, Dave followed her, taking on whatever assignment came his way.

"I started literally from the ground up, mowing lawns and changing sprinkler heads. Somebody would leave and I'd take on a different job. I ran the crematory for four years, started doing some bookkeeping and payroll. I went into the office and started doing sales and finally got licensed as a funeral director and cemetery manager," said Dave. Today he owns Park View in Manteca and Colonial Rose in Stockton.

Now Dave hasn't completely abandoned his classic rock notes; he says the song lineup for Whiskey Kiss is 60/40, meaning 60 percent country and 40 percent rock. And, of course, he hasn't lost track of that infant, Amber Massey, who inspired him to fetch that unwanted guitar from the closet nearly 40 years ago. When Amber and her best pal Chrissy perform in the area in the band The Vallies, that's Dave off to the side, helping out on guitar. ♦



I am always looking for new and exciting gigs to showcase musicians in our community who deserve recognition. Stay tuned!
Feel free to reach out: tim@dalyvideoservices.com.

CELEBRATE COMMUNITY EVENTS

SEPTEMBER 11-13

St. Basil Greek Food Festival

St. Basil Greek Orthodox Church

Info: stocktongreekfoodfest.com

SEPTEMBER 19

Family Day at the Park

Weber Point Event Center

Info: familydayatthepark.com

SEPTEMBER 26

Ironstone Concours d'Elegance

Ironstone Vineyards

Info: ironstoneconcours.com

SEPTEMBER 12

Camp Caterpillar

Central United Methodist Church

Info: hospicesj.org

SEPTEMBER 19

Obon Japanese Festival & Odori

Buddhist Church of Stockton

Info: (209) 466-6701

SEPTEMBER 26

Stocktober Fest & Car Show

Miracle Mile

Info: stocktonmiraclemile.com

SEPTEMBER 12

LOEL 50th Disco & Diamonds

Capecchio Ovest

Info: loelcenter.org

SEPTEMBER 19

Concert for a Cure

Holy Cross Church, Linden

Info: (209) 483-0329

SEPTEMBER 26

CASA Superhero Run

Lodi Lake

Info: nochildabuse.org

SEPTEMBER 12

One Under the Stars

Private estate

Info: rrop.org/whats-happening/

SEPTEMBER 20

Friends Outside Champagne Gala

BellaVista Rooftop

Info: friendsoutside.org

SEPTEMBER 26

Harvest & Heroes

Capecchio Ovest

Info: lodipolicefoundation.org

SEPTEMBER 17-20

Lodi Grape Festival

Lodi Grape Festival Grounds

Info: (209) 369-2771

SEPTEMBER 25

Lincoln High c/o 76 Reunion

Brookside Golf & Country Club

Info: (209) 957-9000

SAVE THE DATE

OCTOBER 3

USS Lucid Open House

3100 Monte Diablo Ave.

Info: SMMfall2026.eventbrite.com

SEPTEMBER 18

Port City Paella Dinner

Humphreys University

Info: deltasculling.org

SEPTEMBER 25

An Evening in Tuscany

Location given on ticket

Info: animalfriendsconnect.org

OCTOBER 3-4

Manteca Kiwanis Pumpkin Fair

Downtown Manteca

Info: mantecapumpkinfair.org

SEPTEMBER 19

Family Promise Gala

Wine and Roses Resort

Info: familypromisesjc.org/gala

SEPTEMBER 26

100 Unforgettable: United Way & Stockton Symphony

The River Mill

Info: unitedwaysjc.networkforgood.com

OCTOBER 10

SVJ Youth for Christ Auction

Hutchins Street Square

Info: (209) 466-0359

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