



We're all just walking each other home.

— Ram Dass

# KINDNESS HAPPENS HERE



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NEWS OF A KINDER WORLD

kindnesshappenshere.org

**INSIDE, PAGE 2**

Lisa Petrillo spotlights local programs that help seniors stay socially connected and safely in their homes.

*Kindness Happens Here* is more than a newspaper — it's a community. [Sign up to read, share and be part of the stories that bring San Diegans together.](#)

**COMING IN FEBRUARY**

Kindness is all around, even underfoot. Scott LaFee reports that even insects may display compassion.

DRAWN IN FROM THE MARGINS, SINGERS FIND HARMONY AND PURPOSE

## Where Every Voice Belongs

Story by  
Mary Curran-Downey

Photos & Video by  
Robert Schneider

The majestic St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral is one of the most impressive worship spaces in San Diego. Its gothic revival style is the perfect backdrop for its Sunday service, when the historic church echoes with the power of its full chorus, accompanied by wafting incense and the soaring notes from the cathedral's massive organ, parts of which date back to 1887.

The building in Banker's Hill is a downtown landmark, hosting classical concerts, celebrating weddings, solemnly observing funerals.

This Monday morning, the pageantry is a little more subdued. A table near the entryway is stacked with packages of new socks and laundry detergent. There are flyers announcing ways to access local services.

Another table is set up with a church-sized coffee urn and homemade chocolate cookies. People amble in, grab a snack and chat with friends or volunteers who make a point of greeting every newcomer.

It's almost time for the weekly practice of the Voices of Our City Choir, a nine-year-old nonprofit that combines music, community and

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### San Diego's Voices of Our City



Natalie Bradley, Music Program Manager, and Steph Johnson, CEO, from left at microphones, lead the Voices of the City Choir in rehearsal at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral.



ROBERT KRIER

Jim Crouch near a mature coast live oak in Escondido.

## One Man, Many Trees

*One Volunteer's Efforts to Restore Native Oaks*

By Robert Krier  
Staff Writer

*From tiny acorns, big dreams grow. And grow. And spread.*

Jim Crouch, a retired middle-school science teacher, is both a dreamer and a grower.

His dream for the past seven years has been to help restore Southern California's dwindling native oak population.

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## Kindness In Action

Personal Stories, Opportunities and  
the Benefits of Giving Back



COURTESY MIKE RIGDON / TIERRASANTA VILLAGE

Tierrasanta Village, which is celebrating its 18th anniversary this year, is a model of the nationwide Village to Village Network. The village promotes new connections through a variety of services and activities, including a holiday trolley tour and a cornhole and pizza party.

# Building Safety Nets for San Diego's Seniors

By Lisa Petrillo  
Staff Writer

We're all getting older — no point arguing with gravity. What's harder to face is that America is entering an eldercare crisis. Social Security alone no longer covers basic expenses in 40 out of 50 states, including California.

In San Diego County, 30 percent of seniors risk outliving their savings. People 55 and older now account for nearly a third of our unsheltered population, according to the Regional Task Force on Homelessness.

In fact, individuals 55 and older comprise the largest and fastest growing segment of people living unsheltered in San Diego and nationwide. Rising rents, inflation and stagnant fixed incomes are forcing many seniors into crisis.

The first wave of Baby Boomers is entering retirement without the traditional pensions earlier generations relied on, says Michael McHale, president and CEO

of St. Paul's Senior Services in San Diego. "And they are facing far higher costs for health care, housing and daily living."

Even amid grim statistics, kindness is quietly reshaping eldercare in San Diego, where both longstanding and new programs are making a difference for the elderly.

### THE VILLAGE APPROACH

The idea is ancient: It takes a village. Today, that concept has come to life in a growing national movement designed to help older adults remain socially connected and safe in their homes.

The [Village to Village Network](#), which began in Massachusetts and has now spread to 300 communities nationwide, creates hyper-local networks of volunteers who help seniors with everything from transportation and tech support to companionship. [California](#) has more than 50 independent Villages, including two in San Diego County, [Village Encinitas](#) and [Tierrasanta Village](#) of San Diego.

Guided by the motto "Aging Well Together," Village Encinitas has operated for three years as an all-volunteer nonprofit serving older residents who want to remain safely in their homes.

"It's a small concept," explains Village Encinitas President Jesse Hanwit, "but it's huge in impact."

Volunteers provide transportation to doctor's appointments or social events, help with trash on pick-up day, change light bulbs, move furniture or offer caregiver respite. The technology team helps with ordering online or setting up email.

In Tierrasanta, the Village connects members 50 and older with wellness programs, educational workshops and practical support. Social events such as pizza parties keep seniors connected.

### GOLDEN GIRLS REINVENTED

Housing affordability is one of the biggest pressures facing older adults today. Homeownership costs have risen

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## Kindness In Action

dramatically, while downsizing can be expensive and complicated. These pressures hit solo agers — older adults without partners or children — especially hard. Without a built-in support network, seniors with health or mobility declines can face serious safety issues.

For more than 35 years, [ElderHelp of San Diego](#) has matched older homeowners with extra room in their houses to renters seeking affordable living space. Seniors gain income and companionship; renters gain housing, which is sometimes at below-market rates. Both benefit from oversight by trained staff and volunteers.

### ADOPT A SENIOR

The Lucky Duck Foundation, in partnership with the Rancho Sante Fe Foundation and the San Diego Housing Commission, is helping prevent homelessness among seniors. The [Seniors Safe At Home](#) program offers rental subsidies, case management and help finding employment.

The organization's "Adopt" a Senior initiative is strikingly cost-effective. For \$3,000 annually, a senior can be safely housed, compared to \$40,000 per year in average taxpayer cost for an unsheltered individual, according to the organization.

"Knowing you can make your rent is an immense blessing," one participant noted. "It makes for less stressful days."

### SETTING THE PACE

For almost 20 years, PACE — the Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly — has provided support across a range of aging needs. It addresses housing and affordability challenges, as well as offering medical and social services.

Local PACE providers include [St. Paul's PACE](#), [San Ysidro Health](#), [Gary & Mary West PACE](#) and [Family Health Centers of San Diego PACE](#), with additional programs listed at [calpace.org](#).

### SERVING SENIORS

[Serving Seniors](#), a longstanding San Diego nonprofit, is expanding its efforts to strengthen support systems for older adults. Its senior centers offer subsidized meals, social opportunities, affordable housing, wellness programs



COURTESY MEALS ON WHEELS SAN DIEGO COUNTY

**El Cajon resident, Ann Strutz, is one of only a few San Diego County Meals on Wheels clients who have reached a three-digit age — 108 — which she celebrated last August with Meals on Wheels volunteers. She has been a client of the meal delivery service since 2021 and attributes the daily nutritious food she receives for her longevity. To mark the occasion, volunteers surprised Ann with a beautiful afghan handmade by another client, Christine, 93.**

and practical assistance, including technology coaching.

### MEALS ON WHEELS

[Meals on Wheels San Diego County](#) remains one of the largest providers of direct assistance. Now in its 65th year, the organization has served more than 22 million meals, supported by more

than 4,000 volunteers.

Brent Wakefield, San Diego Meals on Wheels president, notes that his commitment is personal: "I was raised by my grandparents here in San Diego. Being part of an organization that helps our elders live with dignity and independence may be my way of giving back what I was given."

## Kindness In Action

Personal Stories, Opportunities and  
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COURTESY MARY RUTLAND

Achirin, left, and Akoi enjoyed a day at the ocean with their mentor and friend, Mary Rutland — one of many outings they shared as the children settled into life in San Diego.

# What a Refugee Family Gave Me

By Mary Rutland

“This is the best day of my life,” Achirin, 7, told me as I drove her home after seeing a children’s play. Before the event in a downtown San Diego plaza, she had danced with a group of Mexican dancers and joyfully jumped in the water spouts.

Several years ago, I saw a notice in a neighborhood app that St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in North Park was looking for volunteers to mentor refugee families. I responded and was matched with a family of five from South Sudan. (For their privacy, I’m only using their first names.)

At first, at the request of her father, Deng, I helped Achirin with her homework. Afterward, I would take her and her younger siblings — Akoi, 4, and Yar, 2 — for walks around the neighborhood, usually stopping for snacks at 7-Eleven. Sometimes, we played games in the courtyard of their apartment building.

### YOUR TURN

## We Want to Hear Your Story

We invite you, our readers, to share your personal stories of volunteering. Tell us in about 500 words how you benefitted and what you learned. Include a photo and background information on the organization that provided your volunteer experience. We will pick one of your stories for this space each month. We’re looking forward to hearing from you. Send your story to [info@kindnesshappenshere.org](mailto:info@kindnesshappenshere.org)

When the family moved to El Cajon to save money and live closer to other South Sudanese families, their landlord refused to return their security deposit. With another volunteer, I helped Deng prepare his case and accompanied him to court where the judge ruled in his favor.

On other occasions, Deng requested my help communicating with agencies,

completing forms and clarifying school, medical and business matters. It was such a pleasure to see the family living in very modest surroundings but harmonious and affectionate in their interactions. Deng was always in the lead, finding ways to better his family’s life.

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He worked nights as a security guard while his wife, Akuany, cleaned rooms at a casino hotel. They had little time left for children's activities, so I wanted to fill that gap.

Through the course of a couple of years, we went to libraries, the Children's Museum, playgrounds, swimming, Easter egg hunts, carnivals, parades, plays and the beach. We shopped for birthdays and Christmas, did arts and crafts and puzzles, rode the trolley and, of course, ate at McDonald's. Usually, I took the older two children, but sometimes the toddler joined us on outings where she could run and play in a contained area.

When Achirin received a generous scholarship for a week at a mountain summer camp, she was thrilled. We shopped for camp clothes and I loaned her my sleeping bag and air mattress so she would be properly equipped for her adventure away from home.

When a fourth child was born, Deng was needed at home to take care of the infant during the day. I volunteered to take Achirin and Akoi to their sport practices so they wouldn't miss their summer activities.

One day, Deng asked me for help completing an application for a job in Salt Lake City where a friend of his worked. He had become so frustrated that he wasn't able to improve his family's living in San Diego.

Once he was hired, the parting was swift. The family took what they could carry in a few suitcases and flew to Utah. I, of course, deeply grieved the loss of the three



COURTESY MARY RUTLAND

**Deng, at the Hall of Justice, after successfully reclaiming his security deposit, with support and encouragement from Mary Rutland.**

precious children I had grown to love.

Interactions with Achirin, Akoi and Yar were, and remain, a bright spot in my life. They were so lively and curious, with no hesitation to enjoy new experiences and people. They often danced for joy when the mood struck them. We laughed, learned and played together. I miss them greatly.

**Editor's Note: St. Luke's Episcopal Church no longer operates the**

**program Mary participated in. The International Rescue Committee in San Diego ended a similar program because of budget cuts.**

*Mary Rutland is currently a life coach, after a 35-year career as a psychotherapist in private practice. She previously worked as a case manager at San Diego Regional Center for Developmental Disabilities. She volunteered twice with FREDAfrica in Uganda.*

## Find Your Perfect Volunteer Opportunity

### Can You Read Cursive?

The National Archives needs volunteers with cursive-reading skills to transcribe millions of historical documents, including diaries, wartime letters and census records. Human eyes are needed because AI

cannot fully decipher handwriting. Once transcribed, documents become searchable, connecting new generations with their past. Details: [National Archives Citizen Archivist page](#), create a free account and select a project.

### Help Turn a House Into a Home

[PATH](#) (People Assisting the Homeless) builds affordable housing in San Diego. The nonprofit's Move-In program is looking for volunteers to create works of art for clients' new living spaces. Any medium is welcome, but all artwork should express positive themes. Details: email [sigrids@epath.org](mailto:sigrids@epath.org)

## Listening In

Sharing Ideas That Inspire

### EDITOR'S NOTE

# Beginning the Year with Thanks

A friend of mine, Allison Shea, and I were recently talking about kindness when the conversation took an unexpected turn — to beets.

Allison had received a bunch of homegrown beets from an acquaintance, a generous gift that came with a problem. “I have no idea how to cook beets,” she laughed. Fortunately, her next-door neighbor did. The two made a plan: Allison prepared the beets, the neighbor cooked them, and together they created a luscious goat cheese and beet salad to share.

“Kindness doesn’t have to be donating or volunteering,” Allison said. “Sometimes it’s just about sharing.”

I’ve thought often about that story as we wrapped up this second issue of *Kindness Happens Here*. Allison’s experience is a reminder that kindness looks different to everyone — and that no one is excluded from it. It’s a universal language, and we can all be fluent in it.

Thank you for opening this issue of *Kindness Happens Here*. Your presence means everything. This newspaper exists because we believe San Diego is filled with people who lift each other up, look out for their neighbors and remind us — every day — that kindness still matters.

In the new year, we’ll be expanding opportunities for you to take part, because this paper isn’t just for you — we want it to be shaped by you. Each time you read, share or send a note our way, you become part of the kindness community.

We’re also delighted to welcome Robert Krier, a former colleague from *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, to our writing staff. A seasoned journalist and talented photographer, Robert brings deep curiosity and heart to his work. Be sure to read his cover story about Jim Crouch, of Escondido, who transformed his back yard into a nursery for baby oak trees.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

If you’re wondering how to support *Kindness Happens Here* in the months ahead, here are a few simple but meaningful ways:

**Subscribe.** If you haven’t already, sign up for our free monthly newspaper. It’s the easiest way to stay connected — and ensures you never miss a story, a profile or an invitation to participate. [Sign up here.](#)

**Pitch us an idea.** Great stories often begin with a tip from you. If you see kindness in action — or know someone who deserves to be recognized — please tell us. Your suggestions help guide our reporting. Reach us at [info@kindnesshappenshere.org](mailto:info@kindnesshappenshere.org).

**Join our “Your Turn” conversations.** Each month, we pose a question and invite your reflections. Your answers



An unexpected gift of fresh beets provided the opportunity for two friends to share a meal.



**Kindness doesn’t have to be donating or volunteering. Sometimes it’s just about sharing.**

— Allison Shea

bring depth, humor, wisdom and heart to our pages. We also welcome first-person volunteer stories — see Mary Rutland’s account of volunteering with a refugee family on Page 4 for details on how to submit your own.

**Follow us on social media.** Find us on Facebook and Instagram, where we share stories between issues and continue the conversation beyond the printed page. Your follows and shares help grow our community.

**Donate, if you’re able.** *Kindness Happens Here* is a nonprofit — free to read and free of ads. Contributions of any size help us grow, report more deeply and keep these stories accessible to everyone. [Click here to help us grow.](#)

Most of all, thank you for welcoming us into your month — and your new year. We’re grateful to be doing this work with you, and we can’t wait to see what 2026 brings.

— Leigh Fenly

## KINDNESS, ACCORDING TO YOU

## The Kindness That Lasts in Memory

**K**indness Happens Here isn't just about telling stories — it's also about hearing yours. Each month, we pose a question to our community, inviting you to share your thoughts, experiences and everyday moments of compassion. Your stories remind us that kindness connects us all.

Our last question was:

**What simple act of kindness happened to you in 2025 that you'll never forget?**

We are so pleased to present your answers.

## A Daughter Joins the Family

**M**y siblings and I have always worried about our cousin, who was an alcoholic whose wife left him to bring up their daughter alone. Father and daughter lived together in a trailer near the Grand Canyon in great isolation. They didn't even have a television.

His disease led to the end of his life in July. But a wonderful thing has happened to our family as a result. My brother and his wife took in the daughter, who is now 10 years old, and they are now pursuing adoption. Others in my

family are taking part in raising her. My sister, who is a teacher, and my niece, who is an occupational therapist, are working with the young girl's school to aid her learning and catch her up.

The joy she has brought to my family is heartwarming. We are all watching her experience so many firsts, like seeing the ocean for the very first time. We are all so blessed! The love of my family is pretty special.

— *Allison Shea, Ocean Beach*

• • •

## Wedding Memories

**I**nstantly think of my wedding. So many people from both families came together to help put on an amazing ceremony. It was so special to witness such an outpouring of kindness.

I experienced everything from my bridal party and family surprising me with a wedding dress I didn't think I could afford. My friends' husbands (who had never arranged flowers before) put together flower bouquets on the day of the wedding.

My heart still squeezes when I think about how much love I felt from all those

selfless and thoughtful acts. It reminded me of how important and rewarding it can be to be part of a kind community.

— *Trisha Padayachee, Linda Vista*

• • •

## A Thoughtful Connection

When I informed my team that I was quitting, one of my coordinators from Australia send me the kindest response. She wished me the best of luck and offered to write me a reference. She also suggested I reach out to her in Sydney if I ever found myself there so we could meet in person. It meant so much to me that she would offer such kindness to me.

— *Jackie Ayala, Clairemont*

Here is next month's question:

**How do you plan to show kindness to those you love in February?**

Please email your answer to [info@kindnesshappenshere.com](mailto:info@kindnesshappenshere.com) by the 10th of January. We will pick a sampling of responses to feature here. Think of it as adding to a community conversation — one in which words inspire others to spread kindness.

## SNAPSHOT

## Kindness Matters — and Carlsbad Made It Visible

Rising above the Carlsbad Strawberry Fields off the I-5 freeway, this landmark art installation delivers a message as bold as the Hollywood sign it echoes.

The nonprofit [Kids for Peace](#) created the sign as part of its 2024 Great Kindness Challenge.

The towering letters — eight- and five-foot tall — were designed and built by Carlsbad students enrolled in construction trade programs. After cutting, bracing, priming and painting the plywood forms, students from every Carlsbad



COURTESY

school gathered at the Carlsbad High School gym to decorate the letters together.

The Great Kindness Challenge, founded in Carlsbad in 2012 to address bullying and foster inclusion, now reaches more than 20 million students in 115 countries.

## Cover Story: Voices of Our City Choir



ROBERT SCHNEIDER

**Voices of Our City Choir helps San Diegans experiencing homelessness find hope, healing and stability through music and community.**

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outreach to help men and women in San Diego who are now or have been unsheltered. CEO Steph Johnson says people experiencing homelessness need more than a single interaction to make true change.

“It’s not a transaction, it’s about inviting people inside,” she says. “The closing of so many SRO (single room occupancy) hotels has forced so many to find other places to live.”

And once people are outside, getting shelter is a daily challenge for many. Finding basics like food and a place to wash clothes can seem insurmountable, to say nothing of accessing help for physical and mental health issues. After a while, the basic needs of a roof overhead and a warm meal or coat seem more dream than possibility.

### SONGS OF THE SIDEWALK

For years, Johnson brought food and clothing to people in tents or under tarps, in places hidden in remote areas of parks, and in full view on city streets. And, in addition to her corporate career, she sang. She and her husband,

## UPCOMING CONCERT

Jan. 29, 7 p.m.

St. Andrews Episcopal Church  
890 Balour Dr.  
Encinitas, CA 92024

Rob Thorsen, a professional musician, played jazz gigs throughout the county.

In 2009, she left her job to concentrate on the work she felt called to do. Johnson started the Voices of Our City Choir in 2016, and it became a nonprofit a year later. The choir’s profile continued to grow, and five years ago, it appeared on the TV program “America’s Got Talent.” Although the choir didn’t take home the final prize, the event had a profound impact on the singers.

Johnson credits Executive Director Lindsey Seegers, a long-time nonprofit professional, with formalizing the wrap-around services the organization now offers. Food cash assistance cards are

available, as well as information about local food banks. The *Sounds of the Sidewalk* podcast, the work of Member Services Specialist Enrique Rivera, offers encouragement and emphasizes the idea that changing your circumstances doesn’t have to be a solitary effort.

Staff and volunteers focus on building confidence among choir participants so they come to see that they are worthy, skillful, understood and supported enough to make major changes in their lives.

But first, there is singing. About 100 people fill the folding chairs. The cathedral has been an integral part of the choir’s success, providing office space, meeting rooms and the use of choir rehearsal space for a tiny monthly rental. The live band — including bassist Thorsen — is warming up, and the sound focuses the singers.

Johnson and Music Program Manager Natalie Bradley begin with some breathing exercises to warm up the voices. There are actually two choirs — one for everyone who walks through the doors on a Monday morning, and a choir

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## Cover Story: Voices of Our City Choir

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of more trained voices that sing at venues throughout the city.

There are also songwriting, voice, storytelling, theater and art workshops. A partnership with La Jolla Playhouse will provide acting classes and a chance to be a part of a production at the nonprofit Moxie Theatre. An album is planned for a June release. And choir concerts are scheduled throughout the county this year.

Karma, who asked that we use only her first name, was a professional singer but stopped performing when she had a child. “I kept hearing my son say, ‘Mom, you got to sing. You’ve got to start singing again.’”

Then, in her van parked at the Jewish Family Service’s Safe Parking program on Balboa Avenue, she saw and heard the “America’s Got Talent” clip on YouTube and just knew she had to find out more. In her 70s and using a wheelchair for mobility, Karma didn’t find it easy to make friends. That all changed when she came to choir rehearsal and ended up being in the group’s first music video. Five years on, she is still coming and still amazed by her fellow singers.

“The singing felt good,” she says. “But it’s also having people pat you on the back and say, ‘Hey, that sounded good.’ When you’re homeless, you need more than you know. You need somebody to give you a hug once in a while, someone to hold your hand. You need all of that.”

### FINDING FAMILY

A few vocal exercises and they’re ready. The sound climbs to the ceiling, and the singers sway in their seats or stand as the voices dip and ultimately blend, high notes and low notes speaking to each other in a melodious tide. It’s a little jazz, a little blues, a little reggae. Smiles and laughter, sometimes a few tears. It’s part choir, part church, all joy.

The writer Anne Lamott, in her book “Hallelujah Anyway,” describes singing as “breath that is larger than yourself, so it joins you with space, with community, with other realms and our deepest inside places.” She would be very comfortable



ROBERT SCHNEIDER PHOTOS

Choir members, under the direction of Steph Johnson, center, perform across the city, bringing visibility to their lives and stories.



Natalie Bradley, Program Music Director, leads the voices in music that is a little bit jazz, a little bit blues and a whole lot of joy.

### CONNECT WITH VOICES OF OUR CITY CHOIR

- **Listen:** [Sounds of the Sidewalk](#), a podcast written and produced by staff and volunteers and featuring choir members.
- **Online:** [voicesofourcity.org](https://voicesofourcity.org)
- **Instagram:** [@voicesofourcitychoir](https://www.instagram.com/voicesofourcitychoir)
- **Facebook:** [/VoicesofOurCityChoir/](https://www.facebook.com/VoicesofOurCityChoir/)
- **YouTube:** [Voicesofourcitychoir](https://www.youtube.com/Voicesofourcitychoir)

among the folding chairs at St. Paul’s.

Another of today’s choir members, Barrett, who gives only his first name, is a soft-spoken man with light blue eyes. He had lost his wife to Alzheimer’s and his savings to scam artists when a friend suggested he give the chorus a try. “I didn’t really think about joining at first,” he said, but after a preliminary visit, he kept coming. There was something special about the people he met and the connections he made.

“It’s kind of like family,” he quietly ex-

plains. “The many voices, we lift up ourselves and each other. It’s a good experience to be part of the creative process. I love coming here.”

As Johnson is fond of saying, “Anyone can sing. It’s the blend of voices that’s the beauty of it. Whatever comes out is the right note.”

This day, everyone is in harmony.

*Enjoyed this story? Join our growing community of readers by subscribing to [Kindness Happens Here](#).*

## Cover Story: One Man, Many Trees

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“Oaks do amazing things,” Crouch said during one of his many acorn-gathering excursions. “They support more life than any other plant. They are called *the* keystone species.”

Crouch, 74, who lives in Escondido, has poured his heart, time and money into his oak project. His dedication and persistence have inspired many like-minded people to join his cause.

“Jim’s passion for what he does is the first thing you notice,” said Karlie Raine, who designed Crouch’s Re-Oak California web page, has picked acorns for him and contributed financially.

“He’ll be the first to tell you he isn’t an expert, but he’s passionate and he connects with people and asks for help. That’s inspiring to see. It makes you realize that you can make a difference just with an idea.”

### A LITTLE MEDIA

In 2018, Crouch’s idea was to grow and give away as many oaks as he could. He started a small, self-funded backyard operation to propagate seedlings. He gathered thousands of acorns and learned to identify the most viable.

He consulted oak experts at native plant nurseries, botanic gardens and native plant societies. Despite making mistakes along the way, he figured out how to raise healthy oak seedlings. He developed a blend of ground-up leaves and special soil to replicate wild oaks’ growing conditions. He bought deep, tubular pots ideal for the seedlings’ first months.

He seeks out individuals and organizations to plant and care for the mature seedlings. The key, he said, is finding good stewards who will make sure the young trees get regular watering their first two years.

Crouch estimates he’s given away about 6,000 seedlings, more than 2,500 in 2025 alone. Most of those were from threatened Englemann oaks, which have the smallest range (from Baja to Pasadena) of any California native oak.

He dreamed of expanding his operation but lacked space, money and helpers. But last year, stories on TV and



ROBERT KRIER

**Jim Crouch with some of the Englemann oak seedlings he grew last year in his Escondido yard. He estimates he’s given away about 6,000 seedlings, more than 2,500 in 2025 alone.**

online spread the word, allowing him to build a network of growers, pickers, acorn donors and financial contributors.

Since, volunteers have harvested thousands of acorns from a variety of oak species in Valley Center, Julian, Descanso, Jamul, Escondido, Temecula and

San Diego. This year, Crouch is on target to distribute about 10,000 oak seedlings.

Crouch’s awakening to the beauty and benefits of oaks came slowly. Born in Kansas, he moved to Pacific Beach

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# Cover Story: One Man, Many Trees

## TO CONNECT

If you would like to volunteer or donate to Jim Crouch's oak restoration efforts, contact him at [jbobyak2@gmail.com](mailto:jbobyak2@gmail.com), [reokcalifornia.com](http://reokcalifornia.com) or on Bluesky [@jbobyak1.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/jbobyak1.bsky.social).

as a young child and graduated from Clairemont High and San Diego State. When his teaching career began in Valley Center in 1975, he knew nothing about oaks until one of his students pointed one out to him.

After retiring in 2013, Crouch was scrolling online when he happened upon the East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society in Northern California. There he discovered the group's oak restoration efforts.

He learned that native oaks are viewed as a keystone species because they provide habitat, shelter and sustenance for countless species of mammals, birds and insects — and that oaks are among the most effective trees at sequestering carbon.

But he also became aware that the trees are struggling. Agricultural encroachment, invasive pests like the gold-spotted oak borer and climate change have taken a toll on native oak populations in recent decades.

Crouch sees his repopulation efforts as a way to help stem the tide.

"That's what's got me doing this, for my grandchildren."

### GATHERING VOLUNTEERS

Crouch's project has attracted many volunteers, including Valley Center resident Cody Wolf, 31, who has helped prepare soil and pots in Crouch's Escondido yard. Despite becoming the father of twins last fall, Wolf has set up pallets on the ranch land where he grew up to raise 750 of Crouch's seedlings.



ROBERT KRIER PHOTOS

Thousands of tubular pots in a Valley Center nursery will hold Jim Crouch's expanded oak propagation efforts. He plans to produce 10,000 seedlings for distribution in 2026.



The bag is part of a harvest in December that yielded more than 600 viable acorns. Tanner Smith, right, uses an acorn gatherer to pick up acorns west of Temecula.

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## Cover Story: One Man, Many Trees

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Over the years, Wolf has watched 40 to 50 oaks on the property die due to various stresses. His goal is to restore the trees.

The coolest part of the project, he said, was that Crouch was doing it for free. “He just wants to help California get back to the way it used to be.”

A self-proclaimed tree lover, Amy Bellchamber has arranged her backyard in Vista to raise 500 of Crouch’s seedlings. “Oaks hold a special meaning to me,” she explained. “I grew up in the mountains surrounded by them. I have a volunteer oak in my backyard, and I believe I am the only one in the neighborhood with one.”

Crouch, she said, “is an honest, kind person. I am really impressed with what he is doing.”

### DOING IT ALL

Erik Barragan, a worker at a wholesale nursery in Valley Center and a former student of Crouch’s, will be taking care of up to 7,000 of Crouch’s oaks in a greenhouse at the nursery. The nursery owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, is Crouch’s biggest donor.

Another volunteer, Tanner Smith, has done a little bit of everything for Crouch’s operation. In the last 18 months, he’s made about 30 trips from his Hillcrest home to gather acorns in the back country. He’s helped build raised beds, prep soil and pots, and plant acorns in Crouch’s backyard.

“I like that it’s a tangible thing,” Smith said. “You can really feel the results. We’re gathering acorns, we’re planting them, then we get a tree from it. It’s a little bit of work for a lot of reward.”

Karlie Raine, Crouch’s volunteer web page designer, summed up the allure of raising oaks with Crouch. “It’s really just a bunch of big-hearted people who care about trees and the environment,” she said. “Every person who has lent their time, knowledge, land and skills has done so because Jim’s passion has moved them to.”



ROBERT KRIER (LEFT); COURTESY PHOTO

**Acorns that sink during the water test are potentially viable. Acorns that float are more likely to be infested weevils and are discarded. Once they emerge, sprouts are potted in tubular, 14-inch-deep pots.**

## Propagating Acorns

Crouch sorts his acorns by tossing out the ones with cracks or holes, and placing the remaining ones in water. Then he tosses the floaters, as they are unlikely to germinate.

He puts the sinkers in a lidded bucket, filling it half full of moist soil, half full of acorns. Not all the acorns will germinate. The first root, called a radicle, will emerge from the fertile acorns usually within one to three weeks. The sprouts are then potted in tubular, 14-inch-deep pots. Eventually, the roots will be a foot deep in the pot.

The seedling is ready for planting after a second layer of leaves has formed on the shoot, typically after two to five months. Seedlings at this stage survive best if planted as soon as possible.

— Robert Krier

### PATIENT STEWARDS

With thousands of acorns gathered, sorted and potted, plus volunteers lined up to care for them as they grow, Crouch has now shifted his focus to finding permanent landing spots for the seedlings.

He has worked with Native American tribes in North County, as well as the Ramona Grange, the North County Climate Change Alliance, the nonprofit Tree San Diego and many other com-

munity and environmental groups to find proper planting sites.

His objective is to find dedicated, committed takers for his seedlings. “I want to have some indication,” Crouch said, “that my babies will be well taken care of.”

*Enjoyed this story? Join our growing community of readers by subscribing to [Kindness Happens Here.](#)*

# Cover Story: One Man, Many Tree

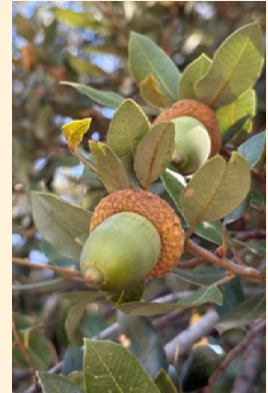


## A Primer to Local Oak Species

*San Diego's Varied Terrain Supports a Wide Array of Oak Types, including These Key Species*

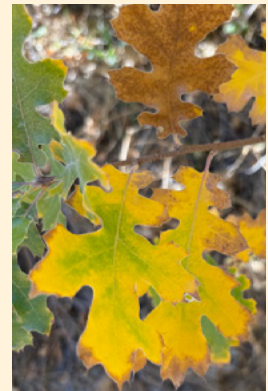
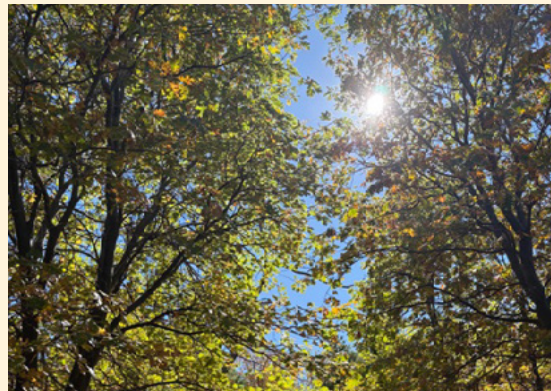
### ENGLEMANN OAK (*Quercus engelmannii*)

A mature Englemann oak in Escondido's Daley Ranch. The leaves of the threatened Englemann oak have smooth edges and are a lighter shade of green than the more common coast live oak. Most Englemanns, which have a very small range, are found in San Diego County.



### BLACK OAK (*Quercus kelloggii*)

Beautiful black oaks last fall in the San Diego County mountains above Lake Cuyamaca. Black oaks, which are deciduous, have large, deeply lobed leaves that turn a vivid yellow in the fall.



### COAST LIVE OAK (*Quercus agrifolia*)

A coast live oak in Escondido's Daley Ranch. A coast live oak seedling grows beneath its parent tree near Temecula. The leaves of the coast live oak are dark green and have spiked or serrated edges.



ROBERT KRIER PHOTOS

## Contributors

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”  
— African proverb (Origin unknown)

# Meet the Team

## FOUNDER & EDITOR



**LEIGH FENLY** was a staff writer and editor at *The San Diego Union-Tribune* for 30 years, where she edited the award-winning Quest science section. She is co-founder and past co-president of Women’s Empowerment International, a nonprofit that provides microfinance loans and other support to women across the world. She has volunteered as a tutor for refugee children and at her neighborhood food pantry. Currently, she is a volunteer docent at Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve.

## STAFF WRITERS



**ROBERT KRIER** wrote and edited for *The San Diego Union-Tribune* for 32 years.

He covered local weather for 20 years and also reported on climate-change issues. He retired in 2020. He now spends much of his time outdoors, marveling at weather, trees, wildlife and nature.



**MARY CURRAN-DOWNEY** has been interviewing people her whole life — and writing those stories for

radio, magazines and newspapers for more decades than she cares to disclose. Her sons are now grown and flown, so she concentrates on reading, quilting, traveling, spending time with friends and family — and always, always asking questions and interviewing everyone she meets.



**LISA PETRILLO** is an award-winning journalist, science writer and author devoted to reading

and discovery and her adopted California home. She’s a former competitive figure skater who has written extensively about murder and mayhem, the space program, the wonders of physics and the world’s most powerful lasers.



**SCOTT LAFEE** is vice president of communications at Sanford Burnham Prebys. Previously, he was director of media relations for health sciences research at UC San Diego. Before that for 18 years, he was a science writer/editor for the *The San Diego Union-Tribune*,

covering all scientific disciplines for the Quest science section. With Dilip Jeste, MD, he is co-author of “Wiser: The Scientific Roots of Wisdom, Compassion and What Makes Us Good” (2020)



**JEANNETTE DE WYZE** worked as a staff writer at the *San Diego Reader* for 30 years. Today, in addition to raising puppies to be service dogs for Canine Companions, she’s a frequent contributor to the Friends of Bonobos blog. She and her husband also serve as the volunteer

liaisons between Women’s Empowerment International and the Nyaka Grannies Project in Uganda. She travels often and maintains an active travel blog, [At Home and Abroad](#).

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— African proverb (Origin unknown)

## Contributors

# Meet the Team

### COPY EDITOR

#### MARGARET KING

has worked since 2009 as a writer and editor for Sally Ride Science, a nonprofit based at UC San Diego that seeks to inspire girls and boys of all backgrounds in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math). Previously, she was an editor at *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. She received her bachelor's degree in English and history from UC Berkeley and her master's degree in journalism from Columbia.



### PHOTOGRAPHER

#### ROBERT SCHNEIDER

retired as professor emeritus at Southwestern College after teaching photography for 33 years. During his tenure, he co-created a film and video production curriculum. He served as a founding board member of the Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park. He was also a founding member of the Binational Association of Schools of Communications, which comprised colleges and universities from both sides of the border. He continues his involvement with photography and video production.



### DESIGNER

#### AMY STIRNKORB

is an art director and designer. After a decade at *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, she launched her own design studio and cookbook publishing company. She has been involved with a number of nonprofits including Women's Empowerment International, Rescue House, American Sewing Guild, and in 2023 co-founded Educreate to inspire and empower young creators through art and technology.



### READERS' RESPONDER

#### DANIELLE DIAZ

is an entrepreneur and lifelong storyteller whose love for journalism began when she was editor-in-chief of her high school newspaper. Today, she brings that same passion for meaningful connection to her work and community, celebrating the beauty of everyday kindness and the people who make it happen.



### ILLUSTRATOR

#### CRISTINA BYVIK

is an award-winning illustrator and designer who has worked with clients such as *The Washington Post*, Starbucks and The Old Globe Theatre. Most recently she served as the graphics director at *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. She has received recognition for her illustrations, designs and information graphics from the Society of News Design. Cristina grew up in the Republic of Panama and has a B.F.A. in illustration from Ringling College of Art and Design. A lifelong futbol fan, she lives in Encinitas with her husband, son and golden retriever.



### COMMUNITY OUTREACH

#### WINIFRED COX

has served as public relations director for a variety of businesses and nonprofits, including UC San Diego, and has provided pro bono work for numerous San Diego organizations. Winifred co-founded the nonprofit Women's Empowerment International with Leigh Fenly, editor of *Kindness Happens Here*.



## Kindness In Action

Personal Stories, Opportunities and  
the Benefits of Giving Back



COURTESY SAN DIEGO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

### CITIZEN SCIENCE

# Help San Diego's Canyons Become Living Laboratories

By Leigh Fenly  
Staff Writer

**M**ore than 80 percent of San Diegans live within a 10-minute walk of a park, open space or patch of nature. One of the main reasons is something easy to overlook: our canyons.

San Diego's flat mesas were built out long ago, but the steep canyons that slice through them were harder to develop. What remains is a remarkable patchwork of wild spaces — a hidden network of natural corridors running right through our neighborhoods.

For many residents, these urban canyons are the places where nature is most present in everyday life. They are the green views from kitchen windows, the paths reached by opening a front door and walking a few minutes

downhill. They are where hawks circle overhead, lizards dart across trails and coyotes quietly move through the city after dark.

Now, scientists want to better understand what's living in these spaces — and they're asking the community to help.

The **Healthy Canyons Initiative**, led by the San Diego Natural History Museum, is a large-scale effort to survey plants, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals living in urban canyons across the county. The project includes 20 local canyons, tracks more than 750 species and has already involved more than 200 citizen scientists.

What makes this effort different is its emphasis on participation. Rather than relying only on professional researchers, the initiative invites canyon-adjacent residents, students and community

**Scientists and volunteers for the Healthy Canyons Initiative, supported by the San Diego Natural History Museum, are tracking 750 species that live in local canyons.**

groups to become active contributors — regardless of scientific background.

Already, local organizations and neighborhood groups have joined in, helping collect data and shape how it's used. The goal is not only to document wildlife, but to foster a sense of shared responsibility for the places so many people live beside.

That sense of stewardship has never been more important. Urban canyons quietly perform essential work: absorbing and filtering storm water, cooling surrounding neighborhoods during heat waves, providing safe passage for wildlife and offering accessible outdoor space in a dense city. Yet they face growing threats from development, pollution, invasive species and climate change.

By building a clearer picture of what lives in these spaces now, researchers can better protect them in the future — and community members can become partners in that work.

### GET INVOLVED

**Make wildlife observations with your phone**

- Download the iNaturalist app or visit [inaturalist.org](https://www.inaturalist.org) and create a free account.

- Search for and join the Healthy Canyons Initiative San Diego project.

- When prompted (on desktop), select “Yes” to trust the project — an important step that allows your observations to count.

- Take clear photos of plants or animals you spot in your local canyon, or within about 500 meters (0.3 miles) of its edge.

Upload your observations and watch as the community helps identify what you've found.

### Host a bird recorder

- Some participants are also helping by placing small audio recorders on their property to capture bird calls, expanding what scientists know about canyon birdlife. [Sign up here.](#)