



We're all just walking each other home.

— Ram Dass



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NEWS OF A KINDER WORLD

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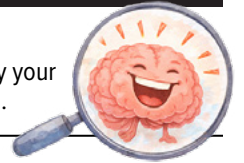
**INSIDE, PAGE 2**

At 91, Duane Jensen values the social connections that volunteering brings.

**Good stories deserve company. Share this issue with a friend.**

**COMING IN MAY**

Scott LaFee explains why your brain loves a good laugh.



FROM SOIL  TO SUPPER

This Earth Day, Fresh, Healthy Food Takes Root Across San Diego



JILIAN BURETZ

**N. Diane Moss, left, plays dominoes and greets neighbors and passersby from her small table outside the offices of Project New Village in Encanto.**

# Growing Healthier Neighborhoods

*N. Diane Moss Leads a Grassroots Effort to Expand Fresh-Food Access*

**By Mary Curran-Downey**  
Staff Writer

**N.** Diane Moss is sitting at a small table outside the offices of Project New Village (PNV), the organization she runs in the Encanto neighborhood of Southeast San Diego.

The table is just large enough to hold her laptop and a glass of water and just far enough from the curb that the noise of passing traffic and trolleys isn't overwhelming. But the table is close enough for her to be able to give a silent wave or an abbreviated hello to everyone

who walks or bikes by.

The passersby offer a brief respite from the Zoom call Moss is following. She takes notes and periodically sighs as the meeting drones on and on. And on. Finally, mercifully, it ends. She closes the laptop and smiles.

Behind her, on the building's pillar, a hand-painted welcome sign announces, "You've found yourself in a peaceful place." The building's warm paint colors coordinate with her coral-colored embroidered blouse and the headband

**Continued on Page 10**

# Turning Backyards Into Urban Farms

*Program Links Gardens, Schools and Neighbors Who Share the Harvest*



JILIAN BURETZ

**Mia Vaughnes and Walt Sandford founded Good Neighbor Gardens in 2013.**

**By Robert Krier, Staff Writer**

**W**hen the founders of San Diego's Good Neighbor Gardens (GNG) get down to earth, healing the land is the top priority. Connecting with the community is not far behind.

GNG is a variation of the usual community-supported agriculture (CSA) food business, in which subscribers pay local farmers upfront, share costs and risks, then reap a wide variety of fruits and vegetables at harvest time.

Like typical CSA businesses, GNG has farm partners around the county, but it also stresses neighbors

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ROBERT KRIER

**Mia Vaughnes, upper right, teaches third graders how to grow a healthy garden at Leonardo da Vinci Health Sciences Charter School in Chula Vista.**

## Your Turn

Your Voice. Your Story.  
Our Community.

### THE GIFT OF VOLUNTEERING

# Super-Ager Thrives as Super Volunteer

By Duane Jensen

Last fall, Danielle Glorioso, a writer at the Stein Institute for Research on Aging at the University of California San Diego, identified me as a super-ager.

I admit I smiled at the label. Not many people reach 91 with good health and a steady appetite for life, and I don't take any of it for granted.

Danielle asked what I thought might account for my longevity and my ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle. One answer might be volunteering, which has contributed to my personal health and vigor.

One of the most meaningful volunteer commitments my wife, Jane, and I share is with Senior Gleaners San Diego, a group that harvests donated fruit — often citrus — from trees around San Diego County.

The fruit we pick is delivered to food pantries, soup kitchens and other nonprofit organizations serving people facing food insecurity. What might otherwise drop to the ground and go to waste becomes fresh food for those who need it.

We've been gleaning for several years. We have gained health benefits from being out in the open air, staying active and making social connections.

Gleaning leaves us free time, so Jane and I have filled other volunteer roles. Since 2009, we have been active in the theater world as ushers. We've volunteered at the San Diego Symphony, The Old Globe, North Coast Repertory Theatre, Lamb's Players Theatre, Scripps Ranch Theatre and La Jolla Playhouse.



COURTESY SENIOR GLEANERS SAN DIEGO

**Duane Jensen, 91, volunteers with Senior Gleaners San Diego, a group that picks fruit and donates the harvest to food pantries and soup kitchens.**

#### CONNECT WITH

### Senior Gleaners San Diego

[seniorgleanerssdco.org](http://seniorgleanerssdco.org)

[info@seniorgleanerssdco.org](mailto:info@seniorgleanerssdco.org)

619-633-9180

As ushers, we welcome patrons, help them find their seats and assist however we can. And yes, as a bonus, we're able to enjoy the performance. Once again, we are in a social environment where we work alongside other ushers while engaging with patrons.

In 2006, I began volunteering at the Inez Grant Parker Memorial Rose Garden in Balboa Park. Volunteers deadhead spent blossoms, weed the beds and fertilize. Each January, we prepare the roses for the year. Pruning the entire garden is tedious and tiring work, but the reward arrives in spring when the garden erupts in a breathtaking display of color.

And because the month still offers a few open days, I also volunteer at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park in Escondido, where I've served since 2001. The park is a marvel of constant change with new animals being introduced and exhibits evolving.

All year, the park draws visitors from around the world. The place is always a fascinating cross section of human behavior. It's a joy to be surrounded by wildlife from across the planet while engaging with local and international guests who come to enjoy it.

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Your Voice. Your Story.  
Our Community.

## Your Turn

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### YOUR TURN

## We Want to Hear Your Story

We invite you, our readers, to share 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)



COURTESY DUANE JENSEN

**Duane and Jane Jensen participated as volunteer ushers for the Mainly Mozart Festival in 2022. The couple volunteers as ushers at numerous theaters in San Diego.**

### THE ROOTS RUN DEEP

I suppose my devotion to “showing up” has deep roots. I am an Iowa farm boy, born in 1934. I grew up in a small community; my high school graduating class had just 13 students.

I give credit to my parents, who impressed upon me and my siblings the importance of contributing to the community through church activities and just being a good and productive citizen.

In 1955, I enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps with no plan to make it my life's

work. But after qualifying for flight training — and completing 1½ years of pilot training in Pensacola, Fla. — I chose to stay.

After 30 years of active service, I retired as a lieutenant colonel in 1984. Five years later, I moved to San Diego for a job with Pacer Systems at Tactical Training Group Pacific, a Navy command in Point Loma.

I met Jane, the love of my life, in Pensacola, and we celebrated 67 years of married bliss last year. Jane and I have two daughters, three grandchildren and one great-grandchild, Amelia, who is 6 months old.

### THE MOST IMPORTANT POINT

If I've mentioned social connection again and again, it's because I believe in its importance. Sitting on the sofa doesn't improve our physical health or our mindfulness. We need to be in the presence of others whenever possible because they have something to offer us — and we, in turn, have something to offer them.

At 91, I consider my volunteer work not just something I do for the community, but something that helps keep me fully alive.

# Volunteer Opportunities Just for You

## Salvation Army Food Pantry

Enthusiastic volunteers are needed to help sort and distribute food through the Salvation Army's downtown San Diego Food Pantry. Jobs are available in inventory management, client service, facility maintenance and gate monitoring. Bilingual speakers are highly valued. All volunteers must be at least 18 years old.

- The pantry needs volunteers to serve on Wednesdays from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Location: 825 Seventh Ave., San Diego.

**Contact:** Adriana Thiele at [Adriana.thiele@usw.salvationarmy.org](mailto:Adriana.thiele@usw.salvationarmy.org)

**Learn more:** [volunteer.usawest.org](http://volunteer.usawest.org)

## Mama's Kitchen

Mama's Kitchen has provided more than 12 million medically tailored meals to San Diegans since it was formed in 1990.

- Volunteers use their own cars to deliver meals on a route that includes 10 to 15 clients on Tuesdays and Fridays. Other volunteers are needed for plating, kitchen preparation, meal bundling and compiling grocery bags.

- Completion of an online volunteer orientation session is required.

**Contact:** [volunteer@mamaskitchen.org](mailto:volunteer@mamaskitchen.org)

**Learn more:** [mamaskitchen.org](http://mamaskitchen.org) or 619-233-6262

Does your organization provide volunteer opportunities you would like to see featured here?

Write us at [info@kindnesshappenshere.org](mailto:info@kindnesshappenshere.org)

## Listening In

Sharing Ideas That Inspire

### CITIZEN SCIENCE

# Join Two Local Citizen Science Projects Happening This Spring

By Leigh Fenly  
Staff Writer

Nature lover Aaron Bean was banding birds in the Australian Outback last year when he noticed an interesting small shrub with purple flowers. Curious, he snapped a photograph and later uploaded it to iNaturalist, one of the world's largest citizen science platforms.

What happened next was a surprise.

A botanist at the Queensland Herbarium spotted Bean's photo online and recognized the plant as *Ptilotus senarius* — a species scientists had presumed extinct. The plant had not been collected since 1967.

Yet there it was, rediscovered not by a researcher, but by a nature lover with a smart phone and a fondness for sharing.

Increasingly, stories like this are emerging as more and more people embrace citizen science efforts. To date, some 4 million people have uploaded photos of more than 500,000 species on iNaturalist. These observations often become valuable data points for researchers tracking biodiversity, climate change and species distribution.

Are you interested in participating? Check out these two large-scale citizen science projects taking place this spring.

#### **BORDER BIOBLITZ — APRIL 1 TO MAY 31**

Border BioBlitz is a collaborative effort launched in 2018 to document the extraordinary biodiversity along the U.S.–Mexico border. The project's goal is to record as many species as possible within about nine miles on both sides of the border, from California to Texas.

Participants simply photograph plants, animals and insects, then upload



COURTESY AARON BEAN VIA INATURALIST.ORG

**The Australian shrub *Ptilotus senarius* was thought extinct until citizen scientist Aaron Bean uploaded a photo of it to iNaturalist.**

the images to iNaturalist. Scientists later help identify the species.

Last year's results illustrate BioBlitz's popularity: 1,793 participants uploaded more than 30,000 photographs, documenting more than 3,000 species.

Images of more than 200 threatened or endangered species were uploaded, including photos of the western burrowing owl, American black bear (spotted in Sonora, Mexico) and lowland leopard frog.

Border BioBlitz, organized by Next Generation Sonoran Desert Researchers, the San Diego Natural History Museum and Botanical Community Development Initiatives, helps scientists better understand the rich biodiversity that exists along the borderlands.

#### **CITY NATURE CHALLENGE — APRIL 24 TO APRIL 27**

In 2015, City Nature Challenge began as a friendly competition between San Francisco and Los Angeles to record as much urban wildlife as possible. The challenge is now an international effort, with almost 700 cities participating across the globe.

Last year, 100,000 volunteer naturalists made 3.3 million observations of 73,000 species. In California, photographers captured images of Gabb's checkerspot, a rare butterfly, and the elusive Sierra newt. Wildlife is defined as anything that wasn't put there by people and is not being cared for by people.

Organizers make it easy to participate: Once you've taken your images, join the City Nature Challenge on iNaturalist and simply upload.

Your images can help scientists build a clearer picture of urban biodiversity. Your simple act of noticing — and sharing what you see — can make a real difference.

## Opportunities To Share Your Wildlife Images

- 1 [Border BioBlitz](#)
- 2 [City Nature Challenge](#)

**SNAPSHOT**

ERIK JEPSEN/UC SAN DIEGO PHOTOS

During 2026 Love Your Wetlands Day, volunteers on kayaks entered Mission Bay to collect trash. Volunteers collected a total of 323 pounds of trash during the annual event.

## Community, Conservation Converge on the Bay



Cleanup volunteers lugged a waterlogged sofa cushion out of the Kendall-Frost Mission Bay Marsh Reserve.

On a bright Saturday morning, 121 volunteers fanned out across the Kendall-Frost Mission Bay Marsh Reserve with a mission: to clean and conserve San Diego's precious wetland habitat. During the 2026 Love Your Wetlands Day, volunteers removed 323 pounds of trash from one of San Diego's last remaining wetlands and learned firsthand why coastal marshes matter.

The annual celebration at the San Diego reserve brought together families, researchers and local organizations for a day focused on stewardship and discovery. The event, now in its 21st year, was organized by the University of California San Diego's Natural Reserve System and the San Diego Bird Alliance, with support from partners including the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, the City of San Diego and California Sea Grant.

**Your Turn**Your Voice. Your Story.  
Our Community.**WHY I STARTED A NONPROFIT**

# Planting a Future After Prison



COURTESY CHRIS BURROUGHS

Chris Burroughs, executive director and founder of Garden 31 Community Initiative, envisioned his nonprofit while serving time in prison.

**By Chris Burroughs**

I can recall a day when I was missing my children. I bought a bus ticket and went to the Bay Area to try to see my son, only to be turned away and to come home with no money and nowhere to go.

After running the streets of San Diego for some time, I saved up enough money for a hotel in the “low bottoms,” the grimmest part of the city. From a third-floor window, I looked down at the concrete where I had just stood. It was full of tents, cracked sidewalks and addiction.

My mind drifted back to my childhood in the San Diego neighborhood of Tiersanta — running around my father’s backyard filled with freshly grown food and grass, with a community full of trees,

parks, canyons and grocery stores.

I remember thinking, “No wonder we’re always scowling. There’s no beauty, no nature, no food access here. This is a whole other world.”

That contrast stayed with me. I realized how my community was truly up against it. That realization followed me through years of incarceration. During my final sentence, after making the difficult decision to step away from a relationship that had held me back, I experienced a kind of peace I had never known.

Fueled by my newfound clarity, memories and past experiences, I began writing the business plan for the nonprofit I envisioned, Garden 31 Community Initiative. My inspiration for the name was

**YOUR TURN**

## We Want to Hear Your Story

In this column, founders of nonprofits tell their stories of taking leaps of faith and building something that didn’t exist before. If you have followed the path to creating a nonprofit, we would love to hear your story. Write to us at [info@kindnesshappenshere.org](mailto:info@kindnesshappenshere.org)

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Your Voice. Your Story.  
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**Your Turn**

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that California was the 31st state to enter the union.

### NO TIME FOR SMALL THINKING

From the beginning, the vision was big. It included a large property with housing — a place where people could train in regenerative agriculture, grow their own food, rebuild confidence and transition into sustainable careers. Everything we do now feeds into that long-term goal.

Started in 2021, Garden 31 is rooted in regenerative agriculture, food sovereignty and community restoration. We build and maintain school gardens, create community growing spaces and provide workforce development pathways in agriculture and land stewardship. We work with socioeconomically disadvantaged communities — including youths and individuals impacted by incarceration — to create real opportunities for growth and stability.

Our office is located in Escondido, but we work mostly in Vista with two farm sites and two school gardens at high schools. We also have a program with East Mesa Juvenile Detention Center, where we run a farm education program on weekends. We train young people so that when they are released, they can smoothly transition into an apprenticeship or job at one of our farm sites.

Last month, we launched a 6-month farm education apprenticeship program for ages 18-24. This will become a larger, state-certified 18-month program next year. Our apprentices will master the fundamentals of regenerative agriculture and, upon graduation, be prepared to take jobs on our farms or elsewhere.

Also, we give back to our community by donating the food we grow and participating in local farmers' markets so that everyone has access to affordable, fresh and organic food

### LIVING PROGRESS

In the process of building up Garden 31, the real reward has been watching the transformation happen. When I see community members vibing together

## regenerative agriculture *n.*

regenerative agriculture is the process of restoring degraded soils using management practices such as no-till planting and limited or no use of pesticides and fertilizers.



COURTESY CHRIS BURROUGHS

Henry Oliva, left, assistant farm manager, works on a farm site with Chris Burroughs, founder of Garden 31, and Saraya McClean, program coordinator. Henry and Chris met in prison and worked together to bring Garden 31 to life.



**CONNECT WITH**  
**Garden 31**  
**Community Initiative**

[Garden31.org](https://Garden31.org)  
[community@garden31.org](mailto:community@garden31.org)

Instagram: [@garden.31](https://www.instagram.com/@garden.31)

TikTok: [@garden.31](https://www.tiktok.com/@garden.31)

in the dirt at our events or high school students beginning to think differently about their futures, I know we're fulfilling our purpose.

Every child deserves to grow up surrounded by nature and with access to healthy food. Every person deserves a chance to rebuild in an environment

that nurtures them instead of breaking them down.

I started Garden 31 because I saw what happens when communities are starved of beauty and opportunity. I believe that when we change the environment, we change the trajectory — and once the trajectory shifts, we change the world.

**Your Turn**Your Voice. Your Story.  
Our Community.**KINDNESS, ACCORDING TO YOU**

# Unsung Heroes Among Us

*This newspaper was never meant to be a one-way story. Kindness Happens Here is built on the voices of the people who live and care in this community. Each month, we invite you to reflect on the moments of kindness that have shaped you — and to pass them along.*

*Your words show us how compassion travels.*

**LAST MONTH'S QUESTION**

**Do you have an unsung hero  
in your life?**

**COPING WITH SHATTERED DREAMS**

**D**, a 58-year-old man, has lived in the same one-bedroom apartment in San Diego for the past 13 years. As a child, he was involved in typical activities such as Little League, soccer, Cub Scouts and swimming at the Y. He and his buddy always had fun raiding bins on trash day, and they found some real gems. He loved playing with his dog, Tasha, and his rabbit, Rover.

In eighth grade, D won the Sweepstakes Award in the Science Fair and a year later was a regional winner in the NASA Space Shuttle project. During high school, he participated on the debating and Academic Decathlon teams.

He received several awards — one from Copley News for an editorial he wrote and another from The Old Globe for excellence in literary and speech arts. He was named most valuable field correspondent for the school newspaper, and he gave a speech at his baccalaureate ceremony.

He continued his education at Occidental College, majoring in political science, diplomacy and world affairs. During his senior year, he spent several months as an intern at the United Nations in New York City.

All of this seemed to bode well for an interesting and productive future, which, sadly, was not to be. His dreams and hopes were shattered.

In his early 20s, D was diagnosed with schizophrenia. This mental illness is characterized by hallucinations and delusions. It also includes disorganized thought processes which make it difficult for a person to start and follow through with plans.

Initially, D was not able to accept his diagnosis and medication. He had jobs and lost them and moved back and forth between apartments and home. He even endured a period of homelessness before entering Father Joe's treatment facility and accepting medication.

D was adopted as a baby. After his diagnosis, he was con-

tacted by his biological half-sister. He drove to Oregon to meet her and his biological mother. The meeting was a severe disappointment for him, as his birth mother clearly had mental illness and alcoholism issues. His half-sister also has limitations.

D has attended treatment sessions and the Clubhouse program sponsored by the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Currently, he gets up every day ready to contend with the voices in his head. Medication helps but does not completely eliminate symptoms of the illness.

He goes for at least one long walk a day, sometimes talking to people along the way. He sets some simple goals to accomplish. He enjoys art, construction projects and taking care of his plants. He spends part of the weekend at my house and enjoys getting out of town on occasional forays.

This intelligent, kind, affectionate man — who has experienced so many profound losses and continues to persevere — is my son and my unsung hero.

— *Mary Rutland, San Diego*

...

**A MENTOR WHO OPENED DOORS**

**I** grew up on a farm in a rural area of Arkansas. We always had enough to eat, but my parents struggled to make ends meet. Neither my mother nor my father had finished high school, and my father could not read or write. I had no expectation that my future would be different from theirs.

At age 15, I got a job at a local hospital as a nurse's aide to help my parents with expenses. I realized I enjoyed being with people and caring for them. As time passed, Marguerite Forrest, one of the nursing supervisors, began to talk to me about my plans after high school. She suggested I join the nurse's club in high school.

Participating in the club helped me realize there were other opportunities after high school, but my self-esteem was low and my grades were average.

Marguerite became my mentor, encouraging me to speak to the college counselor and take extra classes in chemistry, physics and biology in high school.

In January of my senior year, Marguerite told my mother and

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**Your Turn**



COURTESY MARY WHITEHEAD

In 1969, Mary Whitehead, third from left, posed with some of her fellow nursing school graduates from the University of Central Arkansas.

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me about a university that was providing government loans for nursing students. She suggested my mother take me to meet the university president and apply for the loan. We made the trip, and I was accepted into the college and qualified for the loan.

I entered university as one of 100 students in the nursing program; four years later, I was among the 28 remaining students who graduated. I started a job as a new nurse in 1969.

Because of Marguerite, I have had a successful career and happy life with opportunities and resources to help others and myself. She believed in me and was willing to invest her time and energy. Marguerite changed my life. She is my hero.

— *Mary Whitehead, San Diego*

...

### WHEN A FRIEND STEPPED IN

An unsung hero in my life has accompanied me in spirit for nearly 60 years since I was a 20-year-old nursing student working as a nurse's aide at Cape Fear Valley Hospital in Fayetteville, N.C., where my husband was stationed at Fort Bragg.

The hero, Robert Smith, was an orderly, about 50 years old, medium height with a dark brown complexion. What made him a hero to me is that he rescued me from a Southern gen-

tleman patient who yelled at me for being a “damn Yankee” and ordered me out of his room.

That shook me to my core. Seeing this, Robert took me under his wing and sheltered me from further discrimination that day as I worked through my patient assignments.

When I offered him a ride home, he hesitated, then accepted. I had no idea the chance he was taking riding off with a white Yankee woman. That summer he gave me fresh vegetables from his garden, kept my tiny Renault running on nothing but rubber bands and taught me what courage and friendship really mean.

I never forgot his kindness. He is with me to this day.

— *Linda Corey, Escondido*

### NEXT MONTH'S QUESTION

Has anyone ever paid you a compliment that you have never forgotten?

Please email your answer to [info@kindnesshappenshere.org](mailto:info@kindnesshappenshere.org) by April 10. We'll pick a sampling of responses to feature here. Together, your words create a shared space where kindness is noticed, valued and passed along.

## Cover Story: Growing Healthier Neighborhoods



COURTESY PHOTO

The People's Produce Mobile Farmers Market truck hit the road in 2022.

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that holds back her crown of salt and pepper hair.

Moss has been to more meetings, conferences and events than she can count in her 18 years with PNV, so she isn't too concerned about one longer-than-necessary call. She has always taken the long view.

With Moss at the helm, PNV has become a thriving network of backyard growers and community gardens that bring healthy, locally grown food to Southeast San Diego and Spring Valley — neighborhoods that have few healthy alternatives to fast food outlets.

As the network grows, individuals, families and children get to know each other, make connections and share information about sustainable food choices and ways to turn backyards into garden plots.

This is Moss' life's work.

"This is my neighborhood. This is my home. I live here," she says simply. "I'm doing my share to make it better. I don't have children or grandchildren.

This is what I do."

Moss grew up in Compton in Los Angeles County and, as a prospective freshman, visited San Diego on a college tour.

"San Diego seemed like a good place, close enough to home and with programs that interested me," she said. "I had the best parents in the world. They weren't college graduates, but they said they would make it happen, and they did."

At the University of California San Diego, she received a degree in urban and rural studies. She worked for local nonprofits and then, in 2008, accepted the job of executive director of PNV.

### CONNECTING THE PIECES

Project New Village's office is street-side on Imperial Avenue. It's a bright, welcoming structure that is walking distance to The Mental Bar, a coffeehouse and neighborhood hub that often partners with PNV for community events.

On the avenue, banners atop light posts highlight the area's designation as the San Diego Black Arts & Culture District. Abandoned businesses and board-

ed-up homes are in evidence, but so are signs of development, which some see as an indication of improvement. Moss and others, however, are concerned that gentrification will ease out long-term residents of the area.

Project New Village, founded in 1994, is a menu of projects designed to give people the tools and information they need to change how food is grown and distributed in their neighborhoods.

This includes working with vendors of locally grown and prepared food to ensure they receive a fair price for their goods and are respected for what they do to help feed the community.

"People who grow the food are paid what they ask," Moss said. "Many of the growers are also the people who buy the food."

PNV introduced its People's Produce Mobile Farmers Market truck in 2022. Each month it stops at eight locations, including Morse High School and various community centers.

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## Cover Story: Growing Healthier Neighborhoods

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The Mt. Hope Community Garden on Market Street is an integral part of the organization's web of interconnected programs. It is a sustainable, volunteer-run half-acre garden established in 2011. Vegetables grown in this small but mighty garden help stock the Mobile Farmers Market truck.

On the second Saturday of the month, the garden becomes the home of the Neighborhood Growers Collective, a group that helps new and experienced gardeners learn to grow food for the farmers market truck. Volunteers are invited to community work days.

But the largest project is The Village, a proposed mixed-use building adjacent to the garden that will include a fresh-food marketplace, healthy food prepared by vendors, a commercial kitchen and a community meeting space. The second floor will be the new headquarters of Project New Village and will also provide office space for other nonprofit organizations.

Moss sees The Village as bringing together all the programs, people and ideas needed to build a healthy, engaged community in Encanto. A capital campaign, individual fundraising and grant writing are underway to raise necessary funds. Moss hopes to break ground by the end of the year.

"We've put a lot into this," she said with a quiet confidence that speaks of years of bringing plans and ideas into reality. "Eventually it will pay off."

Moss remembers a time when she was attending a meeting about food justice in her early days at PNV. People were interested and engaged, but she realized something immediately. She was the only person of color in the room. That had to change.

As she does with so many projects, she began to make the group more inclusive by starting conversations with her African American neighbors. Little by little, neighbors got other neighbors involved. It was a series of intentional steps that gradually helped to shift the thinking about how healthy food can be a part of the neighborhood and how residents can be responsible for making that food available for themselves and their families.



JILIAN BURETZ

**N. Diane Moss at Project New Village, where she has been executive director since 2008. The N before her name stands for Nye Nye Ke Vu, an honorific bestowed on her by her peers. It means to be humble or self-righteous in a good way.**

### FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

"She has the long-term vision to make changes, and she's always willing to do things in different ways and include different people," San Diego State University Professor Pascale Joassart-Marcelli said of Moss.

Joassart-Marcelli is a professor of geography and director of the Urban Studies and Food Studies Program at SDSU. Fifteen years ago, someone told her Moss was a person she needed to meet.

"I went to a meeting at Project New Village and never stopped going!" Joassart-Marcelli said with a laugh. "I was impressed with (Moss') work and everything they were trying to do."

Joassart-Marcelli has been involved with documenting the history and needs of the area to help secure grant funding. Her students have volunteered and worked as interns, and some eventually have been hired at PNV.

For many, those experiences opened up a new way of seeing where food is



**CONNECT WITH**

**Project  
New Village**

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6315 Imperial Ave., Suite 101  
San Diego

produced and how they could become an active part of bringing that food to the community, she noted.

Moss is "really inspiring and welcoming and inclusive," Joassart-Marcelli said. "She's also very positive. She doesn't dwell on what's not working."

Although work takes up the majority of her days, Moss also likes a good game of dominoes, which she plays on the outside table with friends and anyone who happens by.

When she gets together with family in Los Angeles, she looks forward to her sister's savory cornbread stuffing, made from their mother's recipe. It's the flavor, the aroma and the sharing with family that make it special.

But it's really the work — and the people she interacts with each day — that keep her going for the long haul.

"One thing I know is, you need to stay in the game," she said. "Giving up is way too easy. Stand your ground for the things that are important."

## Cover Story: Turning Backyards into Urban Farms

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sharing their backyard produce. Growing an understanding, appreciation and love of the land in both children and adults is also important to GNG's creators.

"We're trying to build a community of people who have a connection with the earth," co-founder Mia Vaughnes said.

"It's been a great joy partnering with Mia, growing food together and training the next generation of land stewards," Walt Sandford, co-founder, added. "However, the greatest gift has been teaching each other how to love our neighbor."

### LIFE DETOURS

Vaughnes and Sandford lived very different lives before they made sharp career turns toward growing food in 2013.

Sandford had spent time in politics, including stints working for then-mayor Susan Golding and former County Supervisor Ron Roberts. Sandford later took positions at the San Diego Foundation and the San Diego Rescue Mission before becoming executive director of San Diego's Regional Task Force on Homelessness.

Vaughnes was a financial planner for 24 years, selling insurance and investments.

The two met as students at the University of California San Diego, where Vaughnes started a food cart in 1987 that supported local organic farmers. They lost touch after college, then reconnected in 2008.

Shortly after, Sandford built Vaughnes a vegetable garden, which she called her "best gift ever." The garden was lush and productive.

After that success, they noticed neighbors across the street had unused raised beds. The owners agreed to let the couple plant vegetables there. Then those beds took off.

"We both started realizing that growing food and building gardens was our calling," Sandford, 68, said.

"It dawned on me, why don't we do this?" Vaughnes, 61, added. "It became my passion."

Since then, Good Neighbor Gardens has built 360 eco-friendly gardens in yards and schools throughout San Diego.

"Growing food in your yard is not a new concept, but it's an idea whose time



### CONNECT WITH Good Neighbor Gardens

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has come around again," Vaughnes said. "When you plant trees and vegetables, you're basically healing the land.

"Those trees and vegetables want to overproduce, if everything is done right. Then, if you end up with too much, why not share it?"

Sharing a green abundance is part of the ethos. Garden partners are not required to share their surplus, but many do through GNG's neighbor food-sharing program. The produce donated helps supplement the fruit and vegetable boxes.

As Sandford and Vaughnes were launching the business, a family in Jamul gave them access to a virgin piece of land perfect for experimentation. The couple learned to deal with gophers and other pests, grew rare and unusual vegetables, and developed ways to enrich the land.

The two soon realized that soils are poor in much of San Diego County, especially in urban areas. Many yards have compacted clay soils, which drain poorly, or fill dirt that lacks vital organic material.

The solution is raised beds. "We're able to create our own ecology in a raised bed," Sandford said.

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, business boomed. "Everyone wanted to have a garden in the yard," Vaughnes said. Subscriptions for the farm produce boxes skyrocketed.

Demand has since settled down, and Vaughnes capped the program to keep it manageable. Now, GNG continues to encourage people to farm in the city, but the goals are evolving and expanding. Community engagement and education are paramount.

"We're trying to attract people who are already growing food in their yards to be part of our network," Vaughnes said. "Let's link all these folks together and allow them to benefit from the network we've built."

Some people have land and the desire to help but lack the skills, she said. Others have the know-how but not the land.

"We say, 'Get in where you fit in,'" she explained. "We're really trying to be sensitive to who is in the community who can benefit from this food so we're not wasting anything."

Vaughnes created a nonprofit arm of GNG in November 2024. Donors can help pay for school field trips to local farms, subsidize people who want a garden but can't afford it, and fund scholarships for an urban farming apprenticeship program.

She received a California Department of Food and Agriculture grant for education programs and has taught garden programs in 15 schools in the county.

The curriculum she created is designed to help children become confident citizens of the planet. "And the garden is the planet," Vaughnes said.

### GROWING INTEREST

On a warm afternoon in February at Leonardo da Vinci Health Sciences Charter School, students called Vaughnes "Momma Mia" as they toured the school's garden. The garden's raised beds, a small greenhouse and work tables at the Chula Vista school were designed and built by Vaughnes.

This year, Vaughnes instructs grades 2 through 5, and the classes cycle through the garden throughout the day. She encouraged students in a third-grade class to smell, touch and observe. She invited them to count the dozens of bees buzzing around a lipstick bush with tubular red flowers. (It's also known as a cigarette bush, but she didn't mention that name.)

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“Notice the bees aren’t interested in you,” she told the children. “They are interested in the nectar.”

Some children, initially fearful, visibly relaxed. As the group moved on to other plants, one student said, “Bye, bees. We love you.”

As they walked through the garden, Vaughnes instructed the children to smell the basil, feel the sunflower leaves and note the colorful, large leaves of a chard plant. Pointing to onions growing outside and below a raised bed, she asked the students how they thought the plants got there.

Later, she gathered the children on small wooden benches along the garden’s edge. She explained the nutritional benefits plants provide for people and the basic care and elements they need to grow successfully.

Then she split the students into three groups and gave them cookbooks. She instructed them to select recipes for dishes they will cook at the end of the term. The vegetables they plant and tend will end up in those dishes.

One student, looking at a photo in a cookbook, commented, “It looks like something Gordon Ramsey would make.”

Elizabeth Wassinger was helping Vaughnes in the garden and classroom that day. She started as a part-time employee at GNG early this year after completing an internship.

“I love learning from Mia,” said Wassinger, 28. “She’s a great communicator. She does a really good job teaching the importance of eating healthy food. I’m jealous of these kids in a way. I wish I had a program like this when I was in school. These lessons get cemented in kids’ minds at an early age.”

After the students chose the recipes, Vaughnes helped them select and plant the seeds for the vegetables needed for their chosen dishes. She had the students place two seeds in each small container.

“Two seeds is good, because it’s insurance,” she said. “Sometimes, seeds don’t sprout.”

Then she made the students promise to take care of the plants. She had them repeat: “I pledge to water the seeds because, if I do, we’ll have enough food to



ROBERT KRIER

**Students in Amy Komorowski’s third-grade class rejoice as Vaughnes sprays them with water on a warm February afternoon at Da Vinci Health Sciences Charter School in Chula Vista.**

make our recipes.”

Ezekiel, a student in Amy Komorowski’s third-grade class, said he loves the garden and Mother Nature. “And I love how everyone does it as a team and works together to find a recipe,” he said.

Teacher Stephanie Lim’s transitional kindergarten class (4- and 5-year-olds) participated in the program for two years until the curriculum shifted to the higher grades this year. She said even the youngest students greatly benefited from Vaughnes’ teaching.

Vaughnes “really went into what the plants need and how to compost and not waste,” Lim said. “She showed us how bugs and worms are important and how we don’t harm them. The kids were always very excited on garden days.

“She’s so amazing. I love Momma Mia.”

### GARDENS IN THE YARD

Deborah Bucksbaum is now retired, but in 2013, she lived the busy life of an attorney. She wanted to build a vegetable garden in her Kensington yard, but she had neither the time nor the knowledge to create one.

She hired Vaughnes to make raised beds, bring in organic soil and set up irrigation. “Farmhands,” trained by Sandford, maintained the productive garden for seven years.

When Bucksbaum moved to Del Cerro in 2020, Vaughnes installed a new garden and showed her client how to take care of it.

“She taught me so much,” Bucksbaum said of Vaughnes. “She taught me how

to prepare the soil, about the different kinds of problems to look for, like powdery mildew, and how to deal with them. She taught me what things to plant together and what not to.”

The lessons were practical — how to use mint spray to deter rodents. And they were also in-depth — how soil microbes work together with plants.

“She’s very connected to earth and nature,” said Bucksbaum. “And I feel that it connects me more, too. Mia has a generous and loving spirit that goes to all living things — people, animals and plants. She’s added so much to my life.”

Bucksbaum wholly embraces the ideology and practices she learned from Vaughnes; other garden owners aren’t so deeply involved. It makes no difference to GNG’s founders.

“We’re not forcing people to be like us,” said Sandford, who has created a company called WormTRAP, which helps commercial growers assess and renew their soils organically.

“Most of the time, people would see that abundance and would want to learn more about it,” he said. “Some people really live it, and they want to teach their kids.”

Sandford and Vaughnes share the hope that people will see themselves as stewards of the land, not controllers or dominators.

“We benefit from looking at the creator’s way of doing things. We need to stop violating established systems. We need to start restoring them,” Sandford said.

“Even you can be a land restorer.”

## 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 LAFÉE** 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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# 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.



### ART DIRECTOR

**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 Rescue House, Women’s Empowerment International, and co-founded Educreate to inspire and empower young creators through art and technology.



### PHOTOGRAPHERS

#### 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.



#### JILIAN BURETZ

is a San Diego-based portrait and event photographer known for authentic, story-driven imagery. Drawing from her background in social work, she approaches every assignment with a genuine love for people and community.



### 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.



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