

Two killed providing assistance to driver mourned

Nurse, former Marine struck by vehicle after stopping to give aid

By Caleb Lunetta & Karen Kucher
UNION-TRIBUNE

Nereida “Nedi” Benitez was a nurse at Sharp Memorial who lived in Temecula. Gary “Chad” Tillman was a Fallbrook resident who drove big rig trucks.

Both happened to be driving on Interstate 15 last Thursday when they came upon a crash. Each pulled over to help, performing a selfless act that ultimately ended in their deaths when they were struck by another vehicle.

“She’s a nurse, and that’s what nurses do,” said Benitez’s friend and former co-worker Tania Jones. “This was definitely Nedi, and she would do it all over again, too.”

Friends and family are mourning the loss of the two good Samaritans but taking solace in how the two used their final moments to help a stranger.

Benitez, 40, and Tillman, 54, pulled over on the freeway north of state Route 76 around 4:10 a.m. to help the driver of a Honda CR-V, which had run into the back of a Toyota Sienna in one of the middle lanes, according to the California Highway Patrol. The CR-V driver was allegedly intoxicated, the CHP said.

The two reportedly exited their vehicles and went to the driver’s side of the CR-V when a driver in a Honda Civic struck the passenger side of the vehicle. The impact killed Benitez and Tillman.

Jones said she first met Benitez when they worked together at Sharp Grossmont Hospital in one of the COVID units. Despite the dangerous conditions, Jones said the two grew close.

“You could even tell, even under the masks we were wearing, that she was always smiling; that’s one thing about Nedi: her big, beautiful smile,” Jones said. “What you see in all the photos is her positive light and energy.”

Jones said Benitez wanted to eventually make the change over to the emergency room, and — due to the relationship they built during the pandemic — Jones said she and the other nurses helped Benitez take that step in her career.

“She was always very much dedicated to her patients at work and would give you the shirt off her

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S.D. youths doing OK, report finds

But data from multiple agencies shows issues with housing, wages

By Maura Fox
UNION-TRIBUNE

A new report released Thursday on the well-being of San Diego youths says that, on average, the kids are alright — but progress is needed to address disparities among youths of color, unhoused young people and LGBTQ+ students.

The report compiled data from

2005 to 2023 from across local, state and federal agencies to assess how young people are doing across a range of areas — education, economic stability, physical and mental health, victimization and risky behaviors, such as drinking and vaping.

Among the key findings were rising graduation rates among San Diego high school students and stable preschool enrollment. But it also found rising rates of unhoused students and fewer young adults who are able to make a self-sufficient wage.

“In some places, they’re doing

really well,” said the report’s lead researcher Alicia Jurek, from the Policy & Innovation Center. “And then there’s other places where there are some areas of concern.”

The research — supported by her center as well as the San Diego Foundation, Prebys Foundation and the city of San Diego’s Office of Child and Youth Success — compared the well-being of young people in the city and county of San Diego, statewide and nationwide.

The report calls on policymakers to deepen investment into the region’s youths, including through

expanding the Youth Commission, supporting youth programs and funding future research.

But the report comes at a challenging time for youth services in San Diego.

In recent budget deliberations, the Office of Child and Youth Success was nearly cut from next fiscal year’s spending in an effort to confront the city’s projected \$146 million deficit. While spared, the hours at several parks and libraries will be reduced, which youth advocates say could directly

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San Diego International Airport’s Terminal 1 made the list of the seven most beautiful airports from an international competition. The terminal also received high marks for an intuitive walk from curb to boarding gate and its curved glass façade. **NELVIN C. CEPEDA / U-T**

San Diego named one of most beautiful airports in the world

The new Terminal 1 made the list from the Paris-based Prix Versailles competition

By Phillip Molnar
UNION-TRIBUNE

SAN DIEGO — San Diego International Airport’s new \$3.8 billion terminal has made an international list of the world’s seven most beautiful airports.

The new Terminal 1, which opened in September, made the annual “Most Beautiful” list from Paris-based Prix Versailles. Awards are given out annually at the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) head-

quarters. The award was for San Diego’s new terminal, not the entire airport.

San Diego was one of two American winners, along with the remodel of the Pittsburgh International Airport. Other winners included Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport (China), Frankfurt Airport (Germany), Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport (India), Navi Mumbai International Airport (India) and Techo International Airport (Cambodia).

Prix Versailles was founded

in 2015 with goals of promoting design, sustainability, socially useful buildings and innovation. It also gives awards for hotels, museums and restaurants. No other San Diego buildings made the list, but Monsieur Dior by Dominique Crenn and Lucia restaurants in nearby Los Angeles County won restaurant awards.

Jérôme Gouadain, secretary general of Prix Versailles, said in a news release the airports were “inescapable hallmarks of their regions and their eras.”

Three of the airports will be

awarded a world title by the end of the year, considered a bigger honor (San Diego in the running). Last year, the winners were the Harvey Milk Terminal at the San Francisco International Airport, Terminal 1 at Marseille Provence Airport (France) and the main terminal at Portland International Airport.

The competition’s jurors said San Diego’s new terminal had completely transformed the space that previously was home to an

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EVELYN WEIDNER 1929-2026

Former award-winning nursery operator left a growing legacy

By Barbara Henry
FOR THE UNION-TRIBUNE

Evelyn Weidner, the former longtime owner and co-founder of Weidners Gardens in Encinitas, died Monday at age 96.

Known for her remarkable marketing ability and her forthright, humorous way of expressing her opinions, she received many floral industry awards over the years, both at the regional and the state level; ran the family’s nursery business for more than two decades after her husband died; helped found the “Proven Winners” plant marketing group; and also made TV garden show appearances and wrote gardening advice columns for various publications, including The San Diego Union-Tribune.

She had a knack for connecting people with plants they actually could grow. And her business ideas, such as the Weidners’ annual dig-it-yourself begonia and pansy events, were wildly popular with customers, one of her daughters and several former employees said.

“She was a dynamo,” her daughter Mary Witesman said Wednesday. “We used to say she has six ideas streaming out of her head ...



and we’d say, ‘Let’s pick one.’”

Her husband, Robert, was a well-known plant propagator who introduced eight bromeliads to cultivation in the 1950s, but Evelyn “was a good nurseryman in her own right and that needs to be remembered,” stressed former Weidners Gardens employee Marco Jim Booman, who now runs his own nursery business in Vista.

Kalim Owens, who along with fellow former employee Oliver Storm purchased the Weidners Gardens nursery from Evelyn when she retired in 2013, said her favorite plant was likely the Solemia Begonia. It’s a tough, easy-care

plant that thrives both in sun and in shade, and comes in a wide variety of colors — essentially a “do-anything” plant, he said.

“Evelyn wanted people to do well with their plants ... she always felt if the customers would do well, we would do well,” Owens said.

Born May 28, 1929, to two Swedish immigrants, she began working with plants as a child. Her dad had trained as a horticulturalist in Sweden and Germany, and he took care of Fresno’s Roeding Park before his wife convinced him to establish a plant nursery. Initially, that nursery was in Three Rivers in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, but the family relocated to Long Beach for employment reasons and then re-started the nursery there after World War II. In a 1993 article in the Los Angeles Times, Evelyn said she could recall working in the family business when she was 7 years old.

“I loved selling the plants and happily charmed the customers,” she told the Times reporter.

As a young adult, Evelyn met her future husband while touring his business — Buena Park

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S.D. man charged with aiding Hamas

He allegedly raised funds to support war, U.S. prosecutors say

By Caleb Lunetta
UNION-TRIBUNE

A 38-year-old San Diego man is being charged with allegations that he used social media and a charity to raise funds for humanitarian aid in Gaza as a ploy to financially support Hamas in its war against Israel, as well as personally enrich himself, according to federal prosecutors.

Reda Mazen Rida Sabassi was charged Tuesday in federal court in New York with five counts: conspiracy to provide material support to a terrorist organization, sanctions-evasion, wire fraud, money laundering and making false statements in federal court.

Sabassi was arrested Tuesday in San Diego and made his initial appearance before a San Diego federal judge.

Sabassi’s defense attorney could not be immediately reached for comment.

According to prosecutors, in the wake of the Oct. 7, 2023,

Hamas attack on Israel — which resulted in the deaths of 1,200 Israelis and led to a war that killed over 73,000 Palestinians — Sabassi allegedly used social media, crowdfunding websites and a charity to support Hamas, a group the U.S. government and others have designated a foreign terrorist organization.

In the complaint filed by prosecutors on Tuesday, Sabassi reportedly created and posted a video on social media in the months following the Oct. 7 attack that supported the violent attack by Hamas against Israel.

Since at least 2022, Sabassi has also allegedly used his social media accounts and his charity, Ikram — The Arab Charity Foundation Inc., to solicit donations from people around the world and in the United States that he said would go to humanitarian aid in Gaza, prosecutors said.

Before naming the charity, Sabassi allegedly joked with an unnamed co-conspirator that the charity should be named after al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, according to the complaint.

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National City hires permanent city manager and city attorney

By Walker Armstrong
UNION-TRIBUNE

NATIONAL CITY — The city has a permanent city manager for the first time in more than a year.

The National City Council voted unanimously Tuesday to appoint Douglas Schulze as city manager and Heidi Skinner as city attorney, both effective June 17. The dual appointments close a turbulent chapter that saw six individuals cycle through the city manager’s office in three years and left the South County city operating without stable executive leadership since April 2025.

Schulze’s three-year contract sets his base salary at \$300,000 annually. Skinner, who has served as interim city attorney since February, was appointed to a three-year agreement at \$265,000 annually, with guaranteed 4% raises after years one and two contingent on satisfactory performance reviews.

The instability traces back to May 2023, when City Manager Brad Ralston departed in what Morrison described as a routine transition. His intended permanent replacement, Armando Vergara, died of a heart attack two days after being hired. Ben Martinez followed,

serving first as interim and then being hired permanently in December 2023, before being pushed out in April 2025 over what Council member Marcus Bush previously called mismanagement, including the mishandling of employee investigations. Three interim or acting appointments — Scott Huth, Police Chief Alejandro Hernandez and Director of Public Works Stephen Manganiello — followed before Schulze was selected.

Jeremy Day, president of the National City Firefighters, told the council the frequent turnover in leadership had forced staff to repeatedly reorient to incoming leaders and called for Schulze to work with the teams in place, who he described as “very, very strong, dedicated, committed.”

Karla Apalategui, president of the city’s municipal employees union, said the union participated in the interview process and backed the hire.

“Hopefully, we have a permanent city manager and we can just get stability for our members, for our city, for our residents, for our businesses, and for you guys,” Apalategui told the council. “You guys also need that.”

Schulze comes to National

City with over three decades in municipal management, most recently as city manager of Banning, from October 2018 to March 2025.

Mayor Ron Morrison noted that long tenures in city management have become increasingly rare nationally, and said Schulze’s track record of staying five to seven years in each city stood out.

“Ten or 15 years ago, that wouldn’t sound that good,” Morrison said. “In today’s world, that’s pretty doggone good.”

After the vote, Schulze addressed the council, staff and audience, pledging to be “accessible, transparent and responsive.”

“Public service is about earning trust every day and that begins with clear communication, honest collaboration, and accountability for results,” he said. “I will work hard to ensure National City continues moving forward in a way that reflects community priorities and strengthens confidence in local government.”

The city attorney vote drew warm remarks from across the dais.

“I love being here,” Skinner told the council after the vote. “I can’t wait to work with you, Doug. I’m excited for the future.”

Parents sentenced in baby’s starvation and neglect death

City News Service

SAN DIEGO — The parents of a 3-month-old girl who starved to death in San Diego were each sentenced Wednesday to 15 years to life in state prison.

Brandon Copeland, 25, and Elizabeth Reneedawn Ucmán, 26, were convicted by separate San Diego Superior Court juries of second-degree murder in connection with the 2021 death of their daughter, Delilah.

At the time of her death, the girl weighed 3.65 pounds, less than half her weight at birth, according to prosecutors.

Copeland and Ucmán, who were 21 and 22 years old at the time of the baby’s death, were arrested in November 2021 shortly after police were called to their City Heights apartment on a report that the baby was unresponsive and in need of medical attention. The child was taken to a hospital,

where she was pronounced dead, and her parents were subsequently arrested.

Deputy District Attorney Francisca Balerio told jurors that the child died due to sustained and prolonged malnutrition caused by neglect, rather than underlying medical causes.

The child was briefly removed from the couple’s home after Ucmán’s aunt found their apartment in squalid conditions, with trash, moldy food, insects and pet feces strewn throughout.

The baby was eventually returned to the couple, at which point the prosecutor said the couple cut off all communication with family members and service providers.

“Baby Delilah entered this world healthy and full of promise and within three months she died of starvation at the hands of her parents,” District Attorney Summer Stephan said in a statement.

Defense attorneys for Copeland and Ucmán told jurors their clients came from troubled upbringings that included abuse and bouts of homelessness, coupled with mental health issues that left them largely incapable of caring for themselves or a child.

Copeland’s attorney, Courtney Cutter, said the couple was “functioning at the level of children themselves” and described them as “two naive, immature, psychologically damaged adolescents who believed that they could figure out how to make themselves into parents without anybody’s help.”

Ucmán’s attorney, Anthony Parker, said the couple tried to care for the child, even if their methods were ultimately insufficient. He also said postpartum depression played a role in his client’s inability to recognize how severe Delilah’s condition was.

Police car fatally strikes USD student

By Karen Kucher
UNION-TRIBUNE

SAN DIEGO — A University of San Diego student was fatally struck by a San Diego police patrol car early Wednesday near the Linda Vista campus, officials said.

The collision occurred around 1:30 a.m. on Linda Vista Road near Goshen Street, near USD.

Police said the officer was driving west on Linda Vista in a marked police car when

he “felt an impact on his vehicle,” police spokesperson Lt. Cesar Jimenez said in a statement. The unnamed officer turned his car around and found a man lying in the roadway, Jimenez said. “It is unclear, at this time, why the person entered the roadway.”

Police immediately rendered first aid, and paramedics transported the pedestrian to the hospital, where he died.

Police said the man was in his 20s. A USD official

confirmed the man who died was a student.

“The University of San Diego campus community is deeply saddened by the tragic loss of one of our students who was struck early this morning by a vehicle near the campus,” a university spokesperson said in a statement. The name of the student was not immediately released.

Anyone with information is asked to contact police at 619-531-2000. The crash is under investigation.

Today in history

THURSDAY, JUNE 18

ON THIS DATE

1778: American forces entered Philadelphia as the British withdrew during the Revolutionary War.

1812: The War of 1812 began as the Congress approved, and President James Madison signed, a declaration of war against Britain.

1815: Napoleon Bonaparte was defeated in the Battle of Waterloo as British and Prussian troops defeated the French Imperial Army in Belgium.

1979: President Jimmy Carter and Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev signed the SALT II strategic arms limitation treaty in Vienna.

1983: Astronaut Sally Ride became America’s first woman in space as she and four other NASA astronauts

blasted off aboard the space shuttle Challenger on a six-day mission.

1986: 25 people were killed when a twin-engine plane and a helicopter carrying sightseers collided over the Grand Canyon.

1992: The U.S. Supreme Court, in Georgia v. McCollum, ruled that criminal defendants could not use race as a basis for excluding potential jurors from their trials.

2007: Nine firefighters died when they were overwhelmed by a fast-spreading fire in a furniture showroom and warehouse facility in Charleston, S.C. It was one of the deadliest days for firefighting since the 9/11 attacks in the U.S.

2018: President Donald Trump announced he was directing the Pentagon to create the Space Force as

an independent branch of the United States Armed Forces.

2023: The submersible vessel Titan, on an undersea expedition to view the wreck of the Titanic in the North Atlantic Ocean, imploded, killing all five people aboard.

TODAY’S BIRTHDAYS

Paul McCartney is 84. Actor Carol Kane is 74. Actor Isabella Rossellini is 74. Singer Alison Moyet is 65. Football Hall of Famer Bruce Smith is 63. Hockey Hall of Famer Martin St. Louis is 51. Actor Alana de la Garza is 50. Country musician Blake Shelton is 50. Football Hall of Famer and former Charger Antonio Gates is 46. Actor Jeremy Irvine is 36. Actor Bailey Bass is 23.

The Associated Press

YOUTHS

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harm young people and the services they rely on.

In recent years, the Youth Commission, a city advisory body that aims to bridge the gap between young people in San Diego and the city’s leadership, has also struggled to maintain enough members to function.

And a measure San Diego voters passed four years ago to address the region’s shortage of child care by allowing it to be hosted in recreation centers has been stalled by funding uncertainty and bureaucratic delays.

Jurek wants this new report to help spur city officials into action.

“My hope is that my report will mean something,” Jurek said. “That the city will use this to say, ‘Here are some measurable priorities... and that we can continue to invest in research like this to track this over time.’”

Roughly 30% of San Diego County’s population — about 1 million people — are under the age of 25.

The report shows some positive developments. The percentage of adults in San Diego County who have graduated from high school has risen from 84% in 2005

to over 95% in 2023, the year with the most recent available data.

Frequent cigarette use had essentially stopped among San Diego Unified School District students, dropping from 4% in 2005 to 0.5% in 2021. Nearly all — at 97% — of youths in the county had health insurance coverage in 2023, up from 88% in 2008.

But the report also identified some shortcomings. There was an increase in drinking from 2021 to 2023 among San Diego Unified high school students, especially those 18 and older.

The share of students meeting or exceeding expectations on standardized tests in English and mathematics fell in the years after the COVID-19 pandemic began. Hispanic, Black and Native American students in the city and county were less likely to meet those standards than other groups.

The number of homeless students in the city and county also rose from 2021 to 2023 — to over 9,000 in the city and over 21,000 in the county.

Jurek also points to troubling disparities among LGBTQ+ students, who are more likely to report isolation, risky behaviors, poor mental health and suicidal ideation and skipping school

because they feel unsafe.

Karlo Vazquez Melendez, a third-year student studying political science at San Diego State University, says he was most concerned about the declining number of young adults who are making a self-sufficient wage.

“The possibility of me continuing to live here in San Diego and seeing a future with me and my family is becoming more and more distant,” he said.

The report recommends that the city adopt a budgeting system to track its youth and child spending and better understand how the city is investing in young people.

It also asks the city to create a regional working group to coordinate efforts, update the youth well-being report periodically and expand the Youth Commission with a youth ambassador program.

The recommendations reflect the Office of Child and Youth Success’ “overarching concern” that the city must address the gaps in access and opportunity for children and youths.

“The policy recommendations outlined here are grounded in a commitment to equity and aim to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all young people,” the report reads.

CRASH

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back or be running behind you saying: ‘Hey, let me help you,’” Jones said.

Joshua McCabe, director of emergency services at Sharp Memorial Hospital, said the staff’s thoughts and prayers were with Benitez’s husband, son and entire family.

“The entire team at Sharp HealthCare is heartbroken by this tragedy,” McCabe said in a statement. “Ned was a compassionate and dedicated nurse whose commitment to caring for others left a lasting

impact on her colleagues, patients, and the community. She will be deeply missed by all who had the honor of knowing her and the privilege of working beside her.”

Jones said it was very much in character for her friend to want to help others, even at the risk of her own safety.

The same can be said for Tillman, according to an obituary posted online.

Tillman was born in Savannah, Ga., and served 12 years in the Marine Corps before becoming a truck driver, according to the obituary.

“Following his military career, Chad found his next

calling behind the wheel as a truck driver, a profession that suited his love of big rigs and the open road,” the obituary said.

Tillman was remembered for being a devoted husband and a loving father to three daughters and a stepdaughter, and as an avid Padres fan.

“His family was the center of his world, and he poured his heart into every moment spent with them,” the obituary read.

His family took comfort in knowing his final act “reflected the kind of man he truly was: one who gave of himself so that others might be safe,” the obituary said.



Artwork inside Terminal 1 includes Amy Ellingson’s “A Day in the Sun,” a mosaic that celebrates San Diego’s natural and coastal environment. **K.C. ALFRED / U-T**

AIRPORT

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aging terminal.

“This gentle revolution rallied the most advanced expertise to create a high-performance civic gateway,” it said, “(that is) deeply attuned to San Diego’s climate, culture and regional identity.”

The terminal also received high marks for an intuitive walk from curb to boarding gate, its curved glass façade and its lack of

structural columns in ticketing areas that shrinks its carbon footprint.

“Outdoor terraces overlooking the bay, flexible lounges and local concessions enhance the comfort and the profoundly appealing character of the site,” the jurors said.

Terminal 1 architectural firm Gensler was in high spirits because it also designed Pittsburgh’s airport.

“Both of these projects represent something we care deeply about at Gensler; the idea that a great airport can

genuinely transform a city’s relationship with the world,” said Ty Osbaugh, a principal at Gensler.

San Francisco-based Gensler, which also has an office in downtown San Diego, received the world title last year for its work on San Francisco’s airport.

Jurors for the competition are among the world’s top architects but can sometimes include members from different professions. Last year, one of the jurors was “Harry Potter” actress Emma Watson.

WEIDNER

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Greenhouses, which was then “one of the nation’s largest wholesale growers,” the Times reported. They married in 1950, had two daughters — Mary and Jan — and two sons — John and Bill.

The first Buena Park Greenhouses location at Manchester and Orangethorpe avenues became a major freeway interchange in the mid-1950s. Weidners then moved to Brea, but in the mid-1960s, that area’s increasingly smoggy air conditions were damaging the plants and the family came to Encinitas after being urged to do so by Encinitas poinsettia grower Paul Ecke Jr., Mary recalled.

Her parents had a nursery on D Street for several years in the late 1960s, but sold that property and decided to retire, she said. But, “they retired for about five minutes,” joked Owens, the former employee who now co-owns Weidners Gardens.

The family story goes, he added, that Robert asked Evelyn if she wanted some tuberous begonias, and when Evelyn — who adored begonias and at age 16 was the queen of a Long

Beach begonia show — said she definitely would, “He responded, ‘Oh, great! I just bought 25,000 (seedlings).’”

Thus, the famed, dig-your-own begonias patch was founded at what is now Weidners Gardens nursery on Normandy Road in 1971. It was supposed to be a low-key, retirement business, open only in the spring and summer, or at least that was what Robert had promised Evelyn.

“I wasn’t going to spend lots of money on a real sign, so I carefully took our little siber saw and cut out giant letters and fastened them to two wires out in front where you could see them from the freeway,” Evelyn later wrote about the nursery’s start. “(The letters) said ‘Free Flower Show, Dig Your Own Begonias’.

Sometimes they slid along the wires and you could hardly read them.”

It didn’t take long for the new, innovative, dig-it-yourself begonia activity to get discovered. Sunset magazine did a feature on it and within a year the nursery had become a Southern California attraction, Mary said. Then, when Robert died at age 74 in 1988, people asked Evelyn if she was going to retire and sell the nursery.

“There were a lot of

people in our industry who thought we would just fade away without a man at the helm,” Evelyn later wrote in a family history document.

“Well, they thought wrong. I grew up in this business and had no desire to sit home and do nothing.”

She expanded, offering dig-it-yourself pansies in the fall, and getting her daughter to work with her when she had free time from her regular job. Twenty-five years later, in 2013, Evelyn sold the nursery to two of her employees, who still operate it today.

“I worked alongside her ... for 40 years and we never really fought,” said her daughter Mary, who initially started working in the family nursery business as a grade-school student. She added that her mom loved getting people to come to a consensus and adored social occasions. “She never turned down an invitation.”

A celebration of her life is planned for 1 p.m. June 27 at Solana Beach Presbyterian Church, 120 Stevens Ave., Solana Beach. Organizers report that Evelyn asked that the church “be filled with flowers” and people are encouraged to bring either store-bought or home-grown ones.