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Local



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DIAN BELL
Columnist

At 98, wellness spa pioneer starts project in Mexico

Deborah Szekely celebrated her 98th birthday in May.

She is on the cusp of being a centenarian, but she is not sedentary, by any means.

Szekely is embarking on a new \$80 million development venture. But what else would you expect from the founder and matriarch of the Rancho La Puerta wellness spa just across the border in Tecate, Mexico?

She is living proof that a healthy lifestyle pays big dividends. When I called her, she was busy shopping at a grocery store and asked me to call back after she drove home.

Like a preacher delivering an impassioned sermon, Szekely has dedicated her life to improving the spiritual and physical well-being of others. She does more than talk the talk. She walks the talk. Rancho La Puerta was named the top international destination spa by Travel + Leisure in its 2020 World's Best Awards reader survey.

Now it's about to expand by adding a residential village. Rancho La Puerta has joined forces with Mexican-based developer Grupo Espiritu to add a complex of 108 private homes, called The Residences, on its 4,000-acre property. Instead of a three-day or one-week retreat, those who buy will get to live next door year-round if they choose.

Szekely says, at age 98, she remains involved but isn't orchestrating day-to-day developments. She gives credit to her daughter, **Sarah Brightwood**, for being the driving force, major designer and project overseer.

"My daughter said, 'We have to make use of the land. If we don't, someone else will,'" Szekely notes. "Our

SEE **DIANE BELL • B3**

CARLSBAD STEPS UP ENFORCEMENT

Two extra officers to encourage COVID-19 code compliance near beach

BY PHIL DIEHL

CARLSBAD

Carlsbad will pay two additional police officers to step up weekend enforcement of the county and state

health orders in the beach boardwalk areas, similar to efforts under way in Encinitas, Solana Beach and Del Mar.

As in the other coastal cities, the Carlsbad officers will expand their efforts to encourage voluntary compliance with face mask requirements, social distancing and other guidelines in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The policy takes effect immediately.

"It's not to go out and issue citations to anybody who's not wearing a mask, that's not the idea," Police Chief Neil Gallucci said at Tuesday's Carlsbad City Council meeting.

"The main emphasis will be enforcement through education and handing out masks to those that need them," he said. "It does not change the county health order."

Police have the authority to cite

people for not wearing masks under the state and county health orders, but they rarely do. Instead, they usually talk with people about the need for face coverings and offer a mask when necessary.

The council considered but rejected a proposal to make face masks mandatory from sunrise to sunset on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays for everyone

SEE **CARLSBAD • B2**



EDUARDO CONTRERAS U-T

Construction crews tear down a building with artwork by Salvador Roberto Torres at Memorial Prep Middle School on Wednesday.

OPPOSITION FAILS TO SAVE MURAL

Influential Chicano artist, community members attempt to prevent demolition at Logan Heights middle school

BY KRISTEN TAKETA

SAN DIEGO

Community members tried unsuccessfully to stop the demolition of a 32-year-old mural painted by a renowned San Diego Chicano artist at Memorial Prep Middle School in the Logan Heights neighborhood.

The school building bearing the mural was torn down Wednesday afternoon despite a community member, Encanto resident Monica Bernal, holding a spontaneous sit-in protest at the demolition site for

about an hour, before being taken away by police.

The muralist, Salvador Roberto Torres, an influential artist who helped create Chicano Park in 1970, wrote to school district officials this week trying to enforce what he said is his right to remove the mural before it was destroyed.

San Diego Unified officials said the mural could not be saved because it was painted on a classroom building that contained a lot of as-



Salvador Roberto Torres

bestos. Breaking into the wall to preserve the mural would have released the hazardous material, officials said.

District officials said the mural has been documented and will be recreated at the new school site after it's constructed.

Still, community members saw the destruction of the mural as a loss for Chicano culture and the community's history.

Bernal, an Encanto resident who

grew up in Sherman Heights and went to Memorial Prep, said she sees it as another form of erasure of history and culture in an area that is being gentrified.

"It's an erasure of who we are," she said. "Those murals are who we are. They tell our history."

The mural was painted around 1988 by Torres, who co-founded the Centro Cultural de la Raza and spearheaded a murals project at Chicano Park starting in 1973. The park now holds the largest collec-

SEE **MURAL • B3**

Pilot, novelist R.D. Kardon returns with 'Angel Flight'



KARLA PETERSON
Columnist

Long before it became a book, Robin "R.D." Kardon's debut novel, "Flygirl," was therapy. The soul-searching and problem-

solving took place in a notebook, where the San Diego author hashed

out the frustrating, humiliating and infuriating things that happened to her during her 12 years in the testosterone-fueled world of aviation.

Kardon loved flying so much, she gave up her career as a lawyer to become a professional pilot. What she did not love was the personal and professional turbulence that came with being a woman in the cockpit. She was harassed and bullied by men who saw her less as an equally well-trained colleague than as a check in a human resources box. And when the going got particularly rough, Kardon got out her notebook.

"I started writing about it as fiction. I gave all of the people fictional names, I gave myself a fictional name, and that is how I could deal with what was happening," the



COURTESY PHOTO

San Diego author Robin "R.D." Kardon returns to the adventures of pilot Tris Miles with her second novel, "Angel Flight."

61-year-old North Park resident said. "I always knew that I could take what happened to me and turn it into a book. It was the only way I could rewrite history to make sense of what happened. It was the only way I could change the ending, and so I did."

The journey from cracking her first notebook to finishing her first draft took 25 years. The result was the novel "Flygirl," which follows

the fictional adventures of pilot Patricia "Tris" Miles as she attempts to shatter aviation's blue ceiling while dealing with grief, sexism and a perilous flight to Europe. The book was published in 2019, and it went on to be a Top Shelf Book Awards nominee and an International Book Award Finalist.

One year later, Tris is back and so is Kardon.

SEE **PETERSON • B3**

DISTRICT 1 SUPERVISOR RACE HAS 2 DEMOCRATS RUNNING

Hueso, Vargas seek to replace Greg Cox in South Bay position

BY CHARLES T. CLARK

Supervisor Greg Cox has represented District 1's South Bay communities for 25 years and has been so popular that the Republican never faced a significant re-election challenge, even as the district became overwhelmingly Democratic.

Now the race to succeed him may hinge on which of two Democrats can similarly possess Cox's mass appeal in a district which includes Chula Vista, Coronado, National City, Barrio Logan, Point Loma, Sherman Heights, and parts of downtown San Diego.

In about six weeks voters in District 1 will choose between State Sen. Ben Hueso or Southwestern Community College Trustee and health-care advocate Nora Vargas — two candidates who strike a sharp contrast despite their



Ben Hueso



Nora Vargas

shared party affiliation.

"Hueso is the classic insider politician who went from City Council up to Assembly and Senate.... Now his focus is back local," said Carl Luna, professor of political science at San Diego Mesa College.

"You look at Vargas and she's not a politician. She's with the Southwestern Community College District and before that Planned Parenthood and doing community work.

"This race represents the power battle within the local Democratic party."

State Senator hopes to return to local roots

A San Diego native and resident of Logan Heights who worked in the city redevelopment

SEE **DISTRICT 1 • B10**

MURAL

FROM B1
tion of Chicano murals in the world, according to the UC Santa Barbara Library.

The mural on the school featured a diverse group of Memorial students and graduates, veterans of World War I, and Sharon “Christa” McAuliffe, a teacher who became an astronaut and who died in the 1986 space shuttle Challenger disaster.

“It’s a joyful, important, colorful mural that I enjoyed making,” Torres said at a press conference Wednesday morning in front of the demolition site.

There are at least three other murals in addition to Torres’ at Memorial Prep: two murals by Sal Barajas and one by Mario Torero. Torero’s mural, located in the school library, is the only one that could be saved because it was painted on removable panels.



“We want to take some control of our community through our art,” Torero said. “It’s history.”

Over the course of an hour Wednesday, police spoke with Bernal and tried to convince her to leave the site. She refused. Police then handcuffed her and carried her off site by her limbs, she said, and then gave her a misdemeanor ticket for fail-

ing to disperse.

San Diego School Police Capt. Joseph Florentino said the last thing police wanted to do was put their hands on a peaceful protester. But he said Bernal endangered herself and others by being so close to the building, which was already partially demolished and was close to collapsing.

“It’s tough when a histori-

A member of the San Diego Police Department’s Psychological Emergency Response Team talks to Monica Bernal, who staged a protest to the mural’s removal by sitting in the building debris. Police took her off the site after she refused to leave and gave her a ticket.

EDUARDO CONTRERAS U-T

cal community landmark goes away. We respect that,” Florentino said. “It’s a tough one for everybody.”

The murals have been documented in high-resolution color and black-and-white photos in accordance with the Historic American Buildings Survey, said San Diego Unified spokesman Samer Naji. Those photos will be housed at San Diego

Central Library, the San Diego History Center, and UC Santa Barbara Library Special Collections, which houses historical papers on Torres.

San Diego Unified School Board Vice President Richard Barrera, who represents south central San Diego, said he thinks replicating the murals is a better way to preserve them. He said the murals were painted on old, deteriorating walls, and the murals would deteriorate, too, if the district did nothing about it.

“These murals cannot be preserved forever,” Barrera said. “The way to actually preserve them is to replicate them onto spaces that can be preserved.”

Naji said that the Logan Memorial Educational Campus project has gone through years of planning, which included opportunities for community input. The public was notified more than a year ago of

plans to demolish the school buildings, district officials said.

The demolition Wednesday was part of a massive renovation that will transform the Logan K-8 elementary school and Memorial Prep Middle School into a complex that will serve children from infants to high schoolers.

The project will build Logan Heights’ first public high school, along with a Montessori program. The complex also will offer athletic fields, a health and wellness center, access to legal representation, counseling and dental services.

“We know that this is important to the community, and we know that the artist is really invested in this,” Naji said. “We really tried to look at every alternative, but this project really is so critical.”

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DIANE BELL

FROM B1
guests have asked for this for years. They say, ‘I want to be able to stay. I want to be able to retire here.’” So, despite the pandemic, which closed the spa from mid-March until early September, they are going forward with expansion plans.

Their development consists of a mix of two-bedroom casitas, three-bedroom casas and four-bedroom villas priced from \$665,000 up to \$1.5 million in a full ownership arrangement, land included. The homes, constructed with local building materials, will be sensitive to the environment, incorporating solar power, purified water, air filtration and garden patios equipped with hammocks, fountains and meditation space.

There will be a 24-hour concierge, nurse availability and a village center with a gym, library, pool, café and other amenities. But what makes this development special is that buyers also will get Rancho La Puerta memberships with access to its hiking trails, exercise and cooking classes, guest lectures and dining facilities.

Ten acres has been set aside for a vineyard.

“We’re selling to former guests first,” explains Szekeley. “They’ve been coming for years, once or twice a year, and are planning on eventually retiring here.... It will be a community.” Those not residing full time can add their home to the spa’s rental pool.

A shovel has yet to break

the ground, but 57 units, more than half, already have been reserved with deposits, says **Roberto Arjona**, CEO of Rancho La Puerta. He adds that construction will begin in mid-October and will be completed in about 20 months.

It’s an innovative concept for the woman who, with her husband **Edmond Szekeley**, founded the spa in 1940 as a summer health camp about an hour’s drive from San Diego. Visitors were encouraged to bring their own tents. “We had absolutely no money, and it grew little by little,” she says.

In 1958, Szekeley opened, and later sold, the more lavish Golden Door spa in North County, which attracted a Hollywood and VIP crowd.

In 1984, she went to Washington, D.C., to head the Inter-American Foundation but returned to San Diego in 1990 and founded a program that trained leaders of nonprofit organizations. At age 79, she launched the New Americans Museum at Liberty Station to chronicle the lives of recent immigrants and cultural diversity.

While a residential addition is not unique, it’s fairly new to the destination spa world. The Canyon Ranch spa chain has added residential units to some of its properties, including Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Ariz.

Arjona said that, to his knowledge, Rancho La Puerta will be the first true wellness community that integrates its program into daily living without segregating the homeowners.

Proud moment: Sept. 23 was “See You at the Pole” day — a grassroots student movement that has expanded across the country and the globe. It’s a day when people gather, typically at a flag pole, to support and pray for friends, families and neighbors.

This year, San Diego eighth-grader **Taylor Harris** took the tradition at her school, the Rock Academy, to another level. The private Christian school located in the church at Liberty Station lacked a permanent flag pole, so Harris made it her personal mission — and her Girl Scout project over the past two years — to raise about \$5,000 to purchase a pole and U.S. flag for her school.

On Wednesday Harris’s new flagpole was officially dedicated, with Rock Church Pastor **Miles McPherson** leading the invocation. A military flag detail was dispatched by Coronado’s Naval Special Warfare Center to present the flag, which was left at half-staff to honor late Supreme Court Associate Justice **Ruth Bader Ginsburg**.

For Harris, the project truly had a silver lining — she earned her Girl Scouts Silver Award, the highest honor an eighth-grader can earn, for creating a lasting change in her community.

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PETERSON

FROM B1

Team “Flygirl” has reunited for “Angel Flight.” In the new book, Tris emerges from the trauma of her life as a pilot to encounter more drama while working for the smaller Westin Charter Company. In addition to taking on an “angel flight” assignment to fly a woman suffering from Lou Gehrig’s disease from a remote town in Canada to a U.S. clinic for medical treatment, Tris will also face career challenges, love-life difficulties and the very real possibility of another aviation nightmare. Kardon also takes on the hurdles pilots face when seeking treatment for mental-health issues. And yes, sexism is still a problem, too.

Fortunately, the second leg of what Kardon plans on being a three-book journey was a lot easier on her than it was on her heroine. For one thing, Kardon had literary back-up. During a class she was taking at San Diego Writers Ink, she came up with the character who would become Christine, the “Angel Flight” passenger who has her own ideas about how the trip is going to go. In the course of just one quick writing exercise, Tris got a nontraditional antagonist, and Kardon got herself a new story to tell.

“I wrote the first draft in six weeks. It was insane,”

said Kardon, who will be signing copies of “Angel Flight” beginning at 2 p.m. Sunday at Warwick’s bookstore. “I knew I had a character named Christine who would have an illness that is devastating, and then the story of an angel flight popped into my head and I thought, ‘All right. There it is.’ The story came out pretty quick after that.

“With every character I write, I try to delve deeply into their experiences. That’s what people relate to. Stories we write have to give the reader a way to feel. With Christine, I had done quite a bit of research, and I wanted to adequately and honorably represent people who are dealing with these diseases.”

Another important thing to know about Tris’ stories is that they are not Kardon’s stories. Or not all of them, anyway.

Born and raised in New York, Kardon’s first career goal was to be an astronaut. It was the 1960s, so when Kardon’s mother explained that girls could not grow up to be astronauts, it was hard to argue with her. So Kardon ended up studying journalism, mass communications and sociology at New York University. But instead of becoming a writer, she ended up going to law school at American University. She spent 10 unfulfilling years in the legal trenches, and then she took

an introductory flying lesson at a local airport. And there it was. Her next chapter.

Kardon spent 12 years as a corporate and airline pilot, and despite the harassment and the bullying, she loved it. But after 9/11, the aviation industry was decimated, and jobs became hard to find and tough to keep. In 2004, Kardon gave up flying to become a legal recruiter. She moved to San Diego in 2009, and in 2017, she left the recruiting business to work on “Flygirl” full time.

Three years and two books later, Kardon still flies small planes from time to time. But mostly, she leaves the skies to Tris. Her only regret is that she didn’t start her own journey into parts unknown a lot sooner. And if Kardon’s story sounds like it could be your story, she has some thoughts about your next chapter.

“I would say, don’t wait to go for your dream. There will always be a long list of obstacles, but there is always a way around every obstacle. Don’t wait. Start planning now.”

Robin “R.D.” Kardon will sign copies of “Angel Flight” beginning at 2 p.m. Sunday at Warwick’s bookstore, 7812 Girard Ave., La Jolla. Go to warwicks.com for information on social-distancing measures.

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