BP Agents Often the First Responders in Sonoita

By Sasha Hartzell

In the high desert of southeastern Arizona, there is a vast range of grassland known by local Border Patrol agents simply as ‘The Valley.’

An aerial view of the region reveals a shape like cupped hands, the Huachuca and Patagonia Mountain ranges curving around a long, shadowed hollow: this is the San Rafael Valley, where the border is marked only with vehicle barriers - approximately 24 miles of steel rails welded into Xs, demarcating the southern edge of the valley.

It is a designated state natural area, home to the San Rafael Ranch and the headwaters of the international Santa Cruz River. It is constantly surveilled by the Border Patrol agents posted in the mountains above.

Monitoring this segment of border is the responsibility of the nearby Sonoita Station, created in 1989 to fill the lack of personnel that was the biggest challenge - and one which the BP agents have come to help alleviate.

“We love Border Patrol,” said Joseph DeWolf, chief of the Sonoita-Elgin Fire Department. For DeWolf’s team has been collaborating with Border Patrol for as long as he has been there, 25 years. In the past ten years, however, he said the relationship has become much stronger.

“We love Border Patrol,” said Joseph DeWolf, chief of the Sonoita-Elgin Fire Department. For small departments like his, which rely heavily on volunteers, DeWolf said lack of personnel is the biggest challenge - and one which the BP agents help alleviate.

DeWolf’s team has been collaborating with Border Patrol for as long as he has been there, 25 years. In the past ten years, however, he said the relationship has become much stronger.

Formerly limited by a lack of agents, Border Patrol now can respond to calls for help 99% of the time, according to Bartine. "They used to call the station and ask for..."
ABOUT THIS SPECIAL EDITION

By Ruxandra Guidi

Last August, just two weeks after moving to Tucson to start my job as an assistant professor at the University of Arizona’s School of Journalism, I headed to a coffee shop near campus. One of my new colleagues sat at a little table inside, eager to introduce me to Tom Beal, a former reporter at the Arizona Daily Star who’d been there for more than four decades. “Tom has a great idea for a collaboration,” Renée told me as we shook hands.

I’d come to the School of Journalism with 20 years of experience, but gathered all over the place: I’ve been a public radio producer and reporter, a freelance foreign correspondent in South America, a contributing editor for a magazine and a freelance magazine writer. But through it all, I’ve stuck to my vision that some of the best journalism is produced collaboratively - not just among professional journalists, but also including different institutions and media outlets.

Within days of our meeting, Tom and I would begin to plot our three-way collaboration involving the Patagonia Regional Times, the University of Arizona School of Journalism and residents of Eastern Santa Cruz County. The PRT board not only approved our idea, but went to local residents and foundations to raise money for the project, which would involve the students’ two-day visit to Patagonia, meals, van rides, and printing costs for a special summer issue.

Folks in Patagonia and Patagonia also shared their concerns and ideas for coverage; a number of them - business owners, activists, researchers - even came to speak to our group and guided our students throughout the semester as they wrote their pieces. We are very proud of what you’re about to read: these stories are the product of our students’ hard work, but also of a simple wish to try to revitalize not just community journalism but also journalism education.

Needless to say, when we got started with this collaboration in early January we did not foresee how the Covid-19 pandemic would affect our students’ reporting on the ground - let alone how it would affect all our lives. Many of our stories could not be fully reported on the ground before mid-March, when we all found ourselves suddenly unable to leave our homes or get close to people as we’d typically need to in order to interview them and spend time with them.

We hope that by the time this issue reaches you, life in Patagonia and Sonoita will have returned to normal. Thank you for reading; for trusting us with your stories, and supporting a collaboration that we hope to continue for years to come. We want to thank all of the participants who shared their experience with our students, as well as the generous donors who made this special edition possible.

We would welcome your feedback on this issue. Please contact me at rguidi@arizona.edu.

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To publish a nonprofit community newspaper which serves the Mountain Empire communities of Santa Cruz County, including Canelo, Elgin, Patagonia, and Sonoita, and which is open to all views, highlighting local issues and emphasizing the contributions of local talent.

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FAMILY HISTORY

Remembering Harshaw

By Clara Migoya

Antonio Tapia, 79, stands on the porch of his southside Tucson home, scanning a sepia drawing through thick, smoky glasses. His eyes move from a tall poplar tree, to the small adobe building, the tin-shed house, a horse grazing, the dirt street at the border of the wire fencing. On the top of the frame there is a rusty metal label that reads “Tapia Household.”

The piece of art, drawn by a family friend and given to Tapia by one of his granddaughters for Christmas 2015, depicts the Tapia family home as it looked before it and the other buildings in the mining town of Harshaw were demolished by the U.S. Forest Service in the 1980s.

Inside the house, Tapia’s daughters, grandson, and son-in-law are sitting by the kitchen counter or in the adjacent living room as Tapia and his wife, Alicia, reminisce about their early lives in the mining camp just south of Patagonia.

Conversations turn lively when they talk about theballroom nights in Lucky’s Saloon and the wild food and plant harvest. Merlinda Tapia, the oldest of Tony and Alicia Tapia’s children, leaves her post behind the kitchen counter and comes back with a plastic bag filled with acorns they picked last summer around the Harshaw grounds.

Tony Tapia grew up during the 1940s and 1950s in the town of Harshaw, when the Trench and Flux mines were under the operation of the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO). His father worked there, as did the fathers of the 20-or-so other families who lived in the area.

The mining legacy continues mining back. During its prime, Harshaw was a bustling town of 2,000 inhabitants and one of the richest mining locations in the West. In 1880, the Harshaw mining district, consisting of about 40 mines plus prospect sites, produced around $1.1 million in silver. By 1883, the Hermosa Mine alone, half a mile away from Harshaw, produced $700,000, according to a 1915 U. S. Geological Survey report.

“Harshaw at that time was booming and word got around,” said Frank Soto, a cousin of Tapia and the oldest of six brothers and sisters who grew up in Harshaw in the days of ASARCO.

Frank sits with his three brothers, Henry, Mike and Juan, around their dining table in southside Tucson. Angelita Soto, their sister, follows the conversation through a phone call on speaker. Conversations go back and forth from English to Spanish as they all laugh and joke, pouring out memories of their childhood and life in Harshaw. The Sotos recall the bounty of mulberries, black walnuts, wild oregano and quelites - fresh edible herbs, like bledo, chuales, verdolagas and wild onion.

“Harshaw was named after the guy that founded the mines, but it already had a name: El Durazon,” said Henry Soto, third of the six siblings. “We still call it El Durazon (peach).” Juan Soto said the name came probably from the fruit orchards that the Spanish planted in the early 18th century. During the European colonization the mountains of Arizona and Sonora were coveted for their minerals – a USGS report states that the altar of the San Xaver Mission, in the Tohono O’odham reservation south of Tucson, was once adorned with $40,000 of solid silver from the Santa Rita mountains.

“When we lived there, there were two apple trees, two apricot trees and two pear trees, outside our house, and peaches,” said Frank Soto. Mike, jumping in right after, “They were about this big,” he said. “We had a tree about the size of a Granny Smith apple. ‘You would come by the trees and they were ripening, the juice would just come running down your arm.’ There never was any tap water in town, nor electricity for most of their childhood. They ran around barefoot. “We were poor, but we had everything,” said Angelita Soto, across the phone line.

The Soto family story is a typical one in Harshaw. Their great-grandfather Angel Soto, from Placer, California, moved across the West, chasing wealth and an opportunity in the mining industry which extracted rich silver, copper and zinc ores in Arizona. In the 19th century he arrived with the Patagonia Moun tains in hopes of earning a living and sustenance for his seven kids. Despite the mine’s prosperity, wages at that time were around $2 a day for a Mexican worker. Non-Mexicans would usually make double that wage.

Several generations of Sotos worked the mines, including Frank Soto’s father, Miguel “Skippy” Soto. He was called Skippy because of his energetic work style, Juan Soto said. From a young age, Skippy pushed mineral-bearing ore wagons, right behind the mules, out of the shaft.

In 1964 the company closed its operation and a man by the name of E.W. McFarland tried to squeeze out what was left in the rock, although with very poor results, Tony Tapia said. He stayed a short time, after high school, Tapia was employed by McFarland to run the mill. He also took shifts as school janitor and highway worker, and unloaded hay from trucks. In those days, there wasn’t much work left in Harshaw. When the railroad in Patagonia closed down, so did the mine. Most of the people soon followed.

“The mining went away, so people had to move out and go find a job,” said Frank Soto. “Most of them went to Silver Bell Mine and Mammoth.”

The mining families lingered as long as they could. But eventually, as employment had attracted them to settle in Harshaw in the late 19th century, the lack of it pushed them out. Not long after, the U.S. Forest Service took back the land and everyone was evicted. Around the 1980s they plowed the town down. No one had legal claims to stop it.

“They weren’t landlords or anything, they were all settlers there, including us,” said Tony Tapia. “So, they leveled down the place.”

Today there is barely a trace of the settlements. Centuries-old sycamore trees line the dry riverbed of Harshaw Creek. On both sides, where the town used to stand, there is only flat earth. Only four families managed to retain some land; the Hales (the only non-Mexican family of Harshaw), the Villagrans, the Tapias and the Sotos. In the 1930s Tony’s grandfather Mariano Soto had applied for a homestead, acquiring titles for 60 acres of government land outside of the U.S. Forest Service lands. The Tapias also inherited land through their grandfather who was married to Mariano’s sister, Teresa.

Many now call it a “ghost town,” but those who grew up in Harshaw never stopped visiting. Sometimes the Tapias and Sotos go out on the weekends. “Easter, it’s always a big time,” said Merlinda Tapia. In April campers and tents set up along the creek and under a big sycamore tree by the small Harshaw cemetery where tombstones and crosses mark the graves of members of the Medina, Cota, Robles, Valenzuela, Tapia, Encinas and Acevedo families. They line the hill, decorated with religious figures, colorful plastic flowers and some fresh bouquets.

The wealth inside the Patagonia Mountains continues to attract investors. Less than half a mile from the old town grounds, a new mine is prospecting to take, with better means and technology, what others couldn’t.

In 2015 Arizona Mining Inc. began exploratory drilling on the Hermosa mining site, a 450-acre property of private land. In 2018, South32, an Australian mining company with a global presence, acquired Arizona Mining Inc. for $1.3 billion gaining ownership of the project. The company estimates that the Taylor and Clark mineral deposits contain 5.3 million tons of zinc, 5.7 million tons of lead and 344 million ounces of silver.

South32 says that their polymetallic mining operation would take place completely underground, starting at around 2,500 feet beneath the surface and eventually tunneling to 4,000 feet. The Hermosa-Taylor site, as it was renamed, has the potential to become one of the largest zinc-producing mines in the world.

“We are a mining family, so to me a mine is just another mine. But it is too close to home,” said Juan Soto. “Kind of a ‘not in my backyard’ thing.”

Mike Soto goes almost every week to do garden work and care for the Soto Homestead, which sits on a 15-acre plot and receives a few seasonal hunting guests and family and friends for the holidays. The Sotos decided they wouldn’t split their inheritance so the land could stay undivided, in the family.

Juan Soto, the “historian of the family” as his brothers call him, has a hypothesis for why his grandfather would apply to the homestead program. It was the memory of dispossession. The Sotos have been in the West since the 1770s, even before it became U.S. land, but lost all their land when the Guadalupe-Hidalgo treaty made Mexicans living in California foreign.

“The memory is still fresh in a way. ‘My mother said, ‘No matter what happens, you guys stay with the land. Don’t sell it, let it stay in the family,’ ” Tony Tapia remembers.

“I would go back to live there anytime,” said Tapia, dreamily. He paused and, referring to the South32 operations, added: “But now there is too much noise from all the trucks going up and down.”
A Local Venue for Young Classical Musicians

By Nagisa Tsukada

Santa Cruz County residents have been discovering and savoring performances at the Benderly-Kendall Opera House in Patagonia since it opened in 2016, and young musicians have found it to be a great place to showcase their musical abilities.

That was part of the mission to begin with, said Christina Wilhelm, director of the Santa Cruz Foundation for the Performing Arts. Wilhelm said she wanted to provide a venue for young musicians “who don’t have a place to perform.” The Opera House hosts performances by new musicians on Sundays, including college students pursuing a degree in music at the University of Arizona’s Fred Fox School of Music.

The U of A has collaborated with Wilhelm for about three years. This partnership has allowed music students to perform at the Opera House for the local audience. This year, two student pianists, Daniel Karger-Penalosa and Yujia Luan, performed on March 1. Two more concerts were planned for March, but were postponed due to COVID-19.

Wilhelm said she is going to provide the venue for the performers planned in March after the stay-at-home policy is terminated.

The Vocal Studies Program and three harpists, Xiaodu Xu, Yvonne Cox and Victoria Gonzalez, had also scheduled concerts for the first time at the Benderly-Kendall Opera House, according to University of Arizona Assistant Vocal Professor Yunah Lee.

Lee and her vocal students were planning to join one of the Patagonia concerts in March, thanks to Matthew Tropman, a University of Arizona assistant professor of tuba and euphonium who came to Arizona in 2015 and tried to find venues for students. He connects the Opera House and the University to arrange concerts.

Tropman said the Opera House is a great venue for students to experience performing outside of Tucson. Students usually have opportunities to perform for an audience on campus such as senior recitals or graduate recitals. However, the audience for those concerts tends to be their friends and family. According to Tropman, the experience of performing in Patagonia is helpful for students because it is a more realistic performing environment.

“It’s not easy for them to find those opportunities to perform in front of strangers,” he said. “The process of preparing a performance and then going out of town and performing it brings up the skills that they might not have had a chance to work on, whether it’s writing a written program or figuring out how to speak to the audience.”

Tropman says the performances at the Benderly-Kendall Opera House are different because the hall is smaller than usual. The physical distance between the performers and the audience can be as close as the distance between professors and students in a classroom.

The Opera House is far more elegant than a classroom. It features big windows, soaring plastered walls, polished wood floors, a beamed ceiling and a grand piano beneath a white chandelier. Rows of chairs sit close by. It is an intimate space.

In most concert halls, performers play on stage and cannot see the faces of the audience members because of lighting. At the Opera House, the close physical distance allows the performers to directly see and feel the audience’s expressions.

Tropman believes it is good for the students to engage with the audience. Tropman said he also enjoys working with Wilhelm. He respects her passion for music and the Opera House.

“I love Christina. She and I have a very good friendship,” Tropman says. “I only get to see [her] when I go down there, but it’s always so nice to see them and chat with them and we’ve really had a fun time putting a concert together.”

Wilhelm says the project to build the Benderly-Kendall Opera House started in 2005. Her friend Virginia Benderly initiated the concept of the opera house. After Benderly died of cancer in 2006, Wilhelm continued the campaign for ten years until she obtained 20 to 30 regular patrons.

Wilhelm built the Opera House with donations. She named the facility after her friend and philanthropist, John Kendall.

“The local residents helped the project not only with their money but with their talents, too. Wilhelm hired local architects, builders and laborers to complete the project. The Opera House was built entirely by the community.”

Since the opening of the Opera House, the size of the audiences at the performances has increased. Audiences come from Sonoita, Nogales and beyond. Wilhelm said that she has more than 900 people on the mailing list.

According to Wilhelm, visitors have started to share a sense of belonging in the three years since the opening, as they constantly come back to experience the music. “People know each other and it takes me a long time now to get them to be quiet, so we can start a concert,” she said with a smile.

“It’s wonderful, except we’re always a little bit late now starting.”

Wilhelm believes that live music can connect people like few other activities. The audience makes music together with the musicians when they are not passive listeners but “are actually involved in the process of the live music.” When musicians perform for the audience, they directly experience the response during the performance. Lively response inspires the musicians more; active listeners encourage performers.

In addition, the Opera House frequently collaborates with the local school districts. Elementary and high school students serve as interns at the Opera House to learn how to put on a concert and experience live music. According to Wilhelm, most children who participate are unfamiliar with classical music concerts.

“They have to make sure there are seats for everyone, to meet and greet, and it gives some idea of belonging to a different community,” she says. “And who knows, maybe one or two of them...decide, ‘Yeah, maybe that’s what I wanna do for my life.’”

While all events this spring were postponed, Wilhelm did not stop sharing music. She collaborated with the local radio station KPUP to play recordings of performers who have played for SCFPA since 2006.
Playwright

Cont. from Page 1

Norton felt that Chap put a piece of herself into her own character as well. Norton said Chap feels stuck between “the bliss of being a young kid” and “where she wants to be beyond high school.”

“Being in such a rough place is something she can so be consumed by, but then by the end of it she always pulls herself out the same way her character does in the play,” Norton said.

Chap was guided in the writing by Matthew Lysiak, a journalist, writer and father of young journalist Hilde Lysiak. Matthew Lysiak served as her writing mentor. He helped Chap as she modernized the play, writing it from a female perspective and adding modern-day touches, like cell phones, frat parties and vaping.

“I was taking Matthew [Lysiak’s] writing class and he really challenged me to just expand on this play and make it interesting and not just the same old “Catcher in the Rye” everyone’s read,” Chap said.

Lysiak believes Chap will ‘make it’ in Los Angeles or New York City when she grows up. “I think people will hear about [her] in the future,” Lysiak said. “She has a different way of looking at the world. And I can’t speak for artists, but for writers that’s 99% of it.”

Chap said her perspective comes from the experience of growing up in Patagonia, a town with fewer than 1,000 residents. “The person I am is because of the community I’ve grown up in,” Chap said. “What I think is really interesting about this community is there’s a lot of grassroots movements. It’s a lot of people taking initiative for themselves and building things from the ground up, and that’s sort of what I did with this play.”

Chap loved growing up in Patagonia. Even though it’s small, she considers it an arts community because it has so many resources like the art center, the theater, the opera house and the art galleries.

“You grow up amongst artists, and it’s really inspiring to see other people constantly crafting something new,” Chap said. “It’s really inspiring to be amongst people who care about the same things I do. It’s just difficult to accomplish some of these things.”

Chap’s school does not offer art classes, electing to focus on academics and athletics. During Chap’s sophomore year, the school administration switched to a block schedule that took another toll on the arts programs. “Their plan was just to teach to the test, and really focus on core classes,” Chap said. “So the arts programs, therefore, suffered. I’m thankful that the Art Center actually took that over as far as the visual arts.”

Last year, her school did not have a drama program. Working with her friends, family and the Patagonia Creative Arts Association, which operates the Tin Shed Theater, Chap created an arts curriculum for herself, completing with directing, writing and acting. “This is my passion, this is what I love to do. And I was like, I need to do this. It took this realization that I can’t depend on anyone else … I have to sort of take it into my own hands and look to the people who support me, right here and just go forth and hope that people will actually want to come see it and be a part of it,” Chap says.

Chap began going to camp at the Tin Shed Theater when she was five. “My first play was actually in this theater, and I grew up with this theater’s after-school program,” Chap said.

Watching Chap perform has been a joy for her father, Peter Chap. “When they would all be up in front of the school singing, she was the one that always stood out,” Peter Chap said. “I would tell her, ‘Don’t just go through the motions, just live that part. Live the song. When you’re acting, live it and be it.’” Peter encourages her to follow her passion, but to also have a plan B, such as teaching drama at the high school level and chasing her dreams during the summers. However, that doesn’t stop them from spending hours in the living room discussing movies they would turn into shows and how to get a scholarship for college to continue studying theater.

Her father encouraged her to write this play. “I was looking for a good book in 8th grade and he told me I would like ‘Catcher in the Rye,’ Chap said. “My dad has been a big part of my life, egging me on to write these plays.”

Her mother, Elia Manjarre, who lives in Tucson, is also proud of her. “[Her father and I] were both English and P.E. teachers, and we’re so proud of her because we see students all the time, and Cheshed just exceeds our expectations,” Manjarre said. Chap visits her mom on weekends and whenever she has a tennis or soccer match in Tucson, getting a taste of what it’s like to be in a ‘big town.’

Her mom said Chap will do well in an even bigger town, if she chooses that path. “She’s going to have the choice to go wherever she wants after this, and that’s great,” Manjarre said. “I want whatever’s gonna make her happy.”

Chap already got a taste of the professional writing life when Lysiak invited her to join him and Hilde in Los Angeles for the table reading of the Paramount Pictures show being written about Hilde. The screenwriters liked Chap so much they wanted her to stay. “They were blown away by her,” Lysiak said. “She got some one-on-one time with some of the writers and they came away very impressed by her to the point where one of the producers of the show mentioned, ’I wonder if I could get her here to be an intern?’”

When some of the writers asked her to stay for a week, Chap declined, not wanting to miss that much school. However, she does hope to be able to make this a career someday. “You always hear that you can never make a job in the arts and that it’s not possible,” Chap said. “It was really amazing to see the joy in that room during the table reading and I felt so lucky to be there, and everyone’s just laughing and having the best time ever and they’re so proud of what they did. I just really want to get to that point in my life someday.”

At the end of the show, Chap sat on a bench, one of the few set pieces in the minimalistic production. She called each character by name, and the actors took their places behind her. The cast took a bow as the audience clapped and cheered. Bouquets of flowers in hand, she smiled, spoke with all her friends and family, and went home to sleep and prepare for the next performance.
ENVIRONMENT

Reimagining the Border

By Ashley Fredde

If one were to conjure up an image of a southwestern rancher, Richard Collins might be close. Collins looks every bit the part, with his pants pulled over boots that have dried mud around the sole. His hands and face are weathered from working in the sun, and his voice is rough with a slight drawl to it. Yet, Collins’ reality of ranching is much different than what one would imagine.

“You think of cowboys riding around on their pretty horses alongside cattle, the reality is we’re more plumbers than anything else. We worry about wells, windmills, pipelines, troughs, ponds and springs.” He continued, “the weather affects our personalities.”

Water is one of the main things that worries Collins - alongside everything that is supported by it: landscapes, species, life.

In 1998, Collins and his family acquired acreage at the Seibold Ranch, which brought Arizona’s Red Rock Canyon into their pastures. The Red Rock Canyon watershed, just east of Patagonia, held more than $1,000 acres and supported four cattle ranches, but also a live stream that had the endangered Gila topminnow living in it. Collins and other area ranchers came together to form the Canelo Hills Coalition, a model of conservation ranching based on the idea of maintaining land health, or the land’s innate capacity to renew itself. They pushed for a shift in ranching practices such as moving cattle to prevent overgrazing, allowing the land to maintain itself.

Restoring watersheds is a daunting task in a state like Arizona, where only 4 percent of its historically flowing rivers and streams still flow. It’s tough, but as long as those streams cross an international border, but it’s a task both area ranchers and environmentalists are taking on.

Caleb Weaver is on the front lines of that effort as manager of a youth program for Borderlands Restoration Network (BRN). BRN was founded by ecologist Ron Pulliam in Southern Arizona, which Pulliam calls one of the three most biodiverse regions in the United States.

As manager of Borderlands Earth Care Youth (BECY), Weaver teaches “culturally-diverse youth in the economically-depressed region within 50 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border” about landscape restoration and pays them to fence in the transnational watersheds they call home.

High school students in the program work with conservation professionals who teach them how to use rock, wood, and seeds to slow the flow of water across the landscape and ultimately “heal the perceived divide between our deeply connected countries,” according to Borderlands’ website.

In 2016, then-Candidate Donald Trump had vowed to build a bigger, better border wall and denigrated Mexican immigrants as drug smugglers and rapists. Collins has also seen that divide deepen in recent years. “It’s hard to have a friendship with anybody as long as you know the political leaders of our country are calling their population criminals, drug addicts, and rapists,” said Collins. “I’ve gotten to know them. They’re not anything like the people you hear described. Very family-orientated, mostly Catholics, gracious people.”

Weaver said that the harm done to the borderlands has started long before the current presidency. “The last four presidents have not left really positive marks on the border, it’s been a bipartisan effort to cause harm to the borderlands and maybe it hasn’t been intentional, but that certainly has been the result,” he said.

These policies demonstrated to Weaver why the BECY program is important. “It’s critical to have the future decision makers and future land managers be from the border and have really kind of intrinsic and inherent understandings of what it means to work in and be with the border at the same time,” he said.

People like future land manager Jake Paun, one of Weaver’s former students who participated in the program as a high school student in 2015 and is now a youth facilitator for the program. When Paun first entered the program, he wanted to become an optometrist. But since then, he’s begun training to become an agriculture specialist for U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Paun said his father also would like him to apply some of his restoration skills on the cattle ranch he recently started.

“A lot of our borderland restoration techniques that I have come to know through the BECY institute are things that I hope to carry over into this family business,” said Paun. Paun, too, is concerned about the increasing militarization of the border. “I think that it’s a really difficult time where the borderlands region is at risk,” said Paun. “Whether it be because of historical overgrazing, the loss of perennial flows or vibrational patterns going through the wall. I don’t think it came at a great time.”

Regardless of the current political climate, BECY will continue to help young people reimagine the border and the land surrounding it. As Sonora resident Collins, he’d like to reimagine the border as a simple fence and “a little more compassion and cooperation” between the nations.

In Patagonia, Agaves and Bat Conservation Go Hand in Hand

By Ashley Fredde

While there are many plants nestled in Borderlands Restoration Network’s greenhouses, the blue agave is one of Francesca Claverie’s favorites. As she holds a cup of coffee, despite the warm temperatures inside the greenhouse, Claverie, the Native Plant Program manager, leans over the agaves hanging in rows, beaming with the proud look a mother would have when looking at her child. Gently she points to a seed rising out of a brown stone, dirt underneath her nails. “We planted these a couple weeks ago, you see it’s starting to raise the little seed out,” she said with the seed still gently resting on her fingertip. “So that is so cute. I’m so happy that you’re coming up like that. That’s really good.”

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, lesser long-nosed bats are nectar feeders and important pollinators for their nectar plants, which include agaves, saguaro, and organ pipe cacti. The bats enable cross-pollination between plants, as pollen covers the bat’s face and then when it feeds on the nectar. This in turn leads to genetic diversity in the agave plant, something that agave farmers are lacking because they typically harvest the agave stalks before it reproduces, or flowers, to create bacanora, a cousin of tequila. The early harvesting means there’s a lack of pollen for bats, endangering both the agave and bat species.

Until 2015, the bats were listed as an endangered species until a group of scientists found a colony of bats in a cave in Mexico, causing their status to be changed to threatened. Although they were delisted, Claverie still thinks they’re at risk, especially now that the Trump administration is slashing all kinds of environmental laws. “Why would you take this off the endangered species list? Agaves are becoming more and more rare. They’re losing their food sources,” she said.

Borderlands Restoration Network works with agave farmers on both sides of the border teaching them how to create genetic diversity by allowing a percentage of their agaves to bloom. “So that’s kind of the goal with the program is to present a bunch on this side of the border where we’re not cutting them down like crazy,” said Claverie. “The farmers are now letting some agaves flower for the bats and not just for the bats. I mean, if they cut down all the agaves, then they won’t have any more agaves.”

Lea Ibarra and Valeria Cañedo, from the Collectivo Sonora Silvestre, work closely with Borderlands Restoration Network. Being Sonora natives has allowed them to work closely with the farmers. “We recognize that bacanora is a big part of our culture so we found it important to support it in our conservation efforts,” said Ibarra. The producers of bacanora have been receptive to Ibarra and Cañedo’s efforts, allowing them to help design regulations for sustainability. When producers meet the necessary guidelines, a seal of sustainability is added to their product.

“Their love for bacanora really helps them get involved and engage in conservation efforts,” said Cañedo. While the Borderlands Restoration Network and Collectivo Sonora Silvestre look for ways to restore the borderlands, including by saving species like the agave and the lesser long-nosed bat, they are concerned about how the increased militarization of the border will continue to threaten them. The lesser long-nosed bat feeds on and pollinates saguaros and the Organ Pipe cacti, and currently, border wall construction in Organ Pipe National Monument is underway, with construction crews utilizing explosives to clear a path for the wall. The wall is part of a 43 mile project on national monument land. The border wall has the potential to cut off wildlife corridors, affecting many migratory species. Removing saguaros from the environment will have a detrimental effect on the surrounding species. “If a mother plant, it nourishes many other species and when you remove it the natural balance will be damaged. There will be relations there that won’t exist any longer,” said Ibarra. She continued, “the border is something we create, the land doesn’t recognize the border.”
Butterflies

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native plants by transporting pollen from one flower to another. Without pollinators, plants in North and South America wouldn’t repopulate as successfully, according to Nabhan’s research.

But monarch migration across borders doesn’t just affect plants, it also touches the lives of humans.

Nabhan, a 68-year-old research scientist at the University of Arizona, currently lives in Patagonia, which has a small butterfly garden on the edge of the town park. The miniature garden has a small sidewalk with educational plaques and colorful ceramic sculptures. Rainbow butterfly shapes line the benches inside the fenced area. A sign reading “monarch waystation” marks the beginning of a sidewalk flanking the park’s perimeter. These signs record locations with native milkweeds or plants that support monarch populations on their migratory journey.

As a researcher focusing on food and water security at the borderlands, Nabhan has a long history studying pollinator species. In the 1990s, Nabhan worked on the Forgotten Pollinators Campaign at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum to promote awareness of bee, butterfly, bat, dove and hummingbird relationships to wild plant and crop health. “This is what we call one of the most important nectar corridors in continental North America,” he said about Southern Arizona.

Nabhan said research into pollinator migration shows there is a sequence of flowers from Central Mexico to California essential to monarchs. As recently as 20 years ago, most assumed monarchs didn’t pass through Arizona and went directly to California from Mexico. However, nonprofit organizations like the Southwest Monarch Study collected data by tagging monarchs in Arizona, gaining substantial evidence that Arizona was a refuge for the butterflies.

Gail Morris, the coordinator for the Southwest Monarch Study, said monarchs migrate through Patagonia in late March, when temperatures are mild and flowers begin blooming. With spring in the air, the monarchs head north to find refuge from the desert’s blistering heat. And while the Southwest Monarch Study illuminated Arizona’s importance for monarch populations, recent studies have recorded major decreases in western monarch populations.

Pesticides, climate change and habitat loss are to blame. A study published in the Insect Conservation and Diversity Journal says current butterfly populations have difficulty finding their favorite plant, milkweed, due to modern agricultural practices. Glyphosate, an herbicide often used in Roundup for GMO crops in Iowa agriculture, kills milkweed. Milkweeds are essential food sources for monarch caterpillars. They contain poisonous properties, which combined with monarch body chemistry, make them taste bitter to predators.

Climate change also has a hand in killing milkweed populations. With temperatures rising in the Southwest, moisture is squeezed from the landscape. Droughts are prolonged and inhibit massive blooms of milkweed, Nabhan said. Arizona’s native milkweeds aren’t being thinned by pesticides, they are weakened by climate change.

The third obstacle for the monarchs lies across the border in Mexico. The lush forests in Mexico’s Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve are blanketed every winter with thousands of orange and black wings. A UNESCO World heritage site, this reserve is a major attraction for ecotourism in Michoacán state, with a habitat that provides ample nectar sources and water for the monarchs. But some would prefer to use this land in other ways. Conservationists, farmers, and loggers clash on the appropriate use of the reserve’s natural resources.

Many of the illegal loggers are connected to cartel groups. In early February, the murders of two butterfly conservationists went viral. Their bodies were found in suspicious circumstances but nobody has been found guilty of the crimes. After the media reported heavily on these two conservationists, employees at the reserve became worried about the effect on tourism, said biologist Valeria Cañedo.

Cañedo, a biologist in Hermosillo, Sonora, displayed childlike excitement when she talked about conservation during a WhatsApp phone call. Cañedo excitedly described the first time she visited the Reserve: “It’s something magical. You can talk to the butterflies while they land on your head.” She worries the economy of the Reserve will weaken if tourists don’t visit due to the intense media coverage on the murders. This would be a major setback for reserve conservationists working to convince the community that ecotourism is a viable economic option to logging and avocado farming.

Cañedo started the project Alianza Mariposa Monarca in 2016 with Sky Island Alliance, a nonprofit conservation organization based in Tucson. Her project involved fellow university students with the goal of educating the community about the monarch population in Sonora. Cañedo’s group educated younger students and citizens on the importance of migratory species, and enlisted young volunteers in the effort.

That initiative began a monitoring program funded by a scholarship from the nonprofits Conservation International and Nabhan’s Make Way for Monarchs. Cañedo could finally collect data on the monarchs in Sonora through monitoring.

“It was one of the happiest days of my life, I was out sick and I couldn’t go to a field trip with my school so I went to the store and saw five or six butterflies eating on nectar,” she said, “I told someone to get a ladder so I could take a picture to show my friends they’re here, I’m not crazy.”

Francesca Claverie, the Borderlands Restoration Native Plant Nursery Manager in Patagonia, met Cañedo when she came to visit the nursery. Claverie gave her a tour of the warm greenhouses with rows of seedlings native to specific biomes. Cañedo was immediately interested and invited Claverie to present at her university. They began a relationship across the border, sharing research and grant information for conservation work.

Today, Claverie, Cañedo, and Nabhan are working together in Patagonia on a project to identify and conserve the wild relatives of modern cultivated crops. They are working with wild agave, tepary beans and chiltepins, the wild relative of American chile peppers.

Meanwhile, back in Patagonia’s small butterfly garden, you can watch milkweed flowers bloom from spring to late summer. The white Arizona milkweed flowers are a refuge for black-and-orange winged hitchhikers catching a ride on weather patterns from Mexico. Patagonia’s unique location gives conservationists an opportunity to work across the border and collaborate on borderland conservation. “We have to solve these problems together and one country can’t do it on their own,” Nabhan said.
A Cowgirl in the Business of Raising Calves

By Briannon Wilfong

As I pull up to the steps of rancher Chris Peterson’s home, four dogs come to greet me before I can even jump out of the truck. Peterson comes walking out of the house with a big grin on her face. It is a rainy February morning with clouds looming over the rolling, yellow hills of Patagonia.

Peterson proudly shows me the bright, blooming daffodils sitting at her gate that she potted recently as the dogs roll and bark in the dewy grass of her front yard. She walks up the steps into her small adobe house, infused with the aroma of just-baked bread and coffee.

Peterson and I sit down at a large wooden table in her intricately decorated kitchen. Western art, cowboy paraphernalia and photos of family hang from the red-painted walls. Peterson walks over with a batch of homemade cinnamon rolls and offers coffee as her dogs rest at her feet. The front door is open. We can hear the light drizzle of rain coming down while the birds chirp.

It’s an atypical day for Peterson. Typically, the 61-year-old Peterson is awake as the sun barely starts to peak over the Patagonia Mountains, tugging on her boots at 5:30 a.m. to go check the cattle. She picks up her favorite cowboy hat, tussles her sandy brown hair into it and steps out the front door, her four furry friends right behind her.

Looking out over the dimly-lit land, she sets off walking toward her corral to retrieve her horse, Sis. As she comes up to her, Peterson greets her with a smile, calling her pretty.

Peterson, at 5’3” tall, has to stand on tiptoe to give Sis a hug around her neck before placing the rope halter on. She says good morning to eight other horses, greeting every single one as she walks past them. She heads off through her land to check on her cattle.

A week after my first visit, on a sunny morning in Patagonia, Peterson and I prepare to ride out to check the cows. Peterson gently lays a heavy, studded leather saddle onto Sis’s back.

One of her dearest friends and former rancher Sonny McCuistion gave her that very sparkly studded saddle—“a little more bling than I’m used to,” she says—but she still uses it just because he gave it to her, she said with a heartfelt laugh.

She mounts Sis and we head off to find her herd with her dogs in tow, into the tall grass and rolling mountains.

“When I was young, I always wanted to live on a ranch,” Peterson said. “I love animals. You know, as a little girl you always dream; you sit on the fence and you look over all this open country.”

After years of nomadic living in various places, from Haiti to Wisconsin, Peterson and her late husband Larry wanted a place to raise their three young kids. They had a list of requirements, chief among them was a place where they could settle on a ranch.

They chose Patagonia because Peterson recalled seeing the beautiful landscape on an earlier trip, and decided this is the place she wanted to be.

They purchased the RedRock Ranch in 1997. Larry had some experience with raising cattle while living in North Dakota, but raising cattle in Arizona was new to them. They picked it up with Larry working the numbers and business side and Chris working with the animals.

Peterson is in the business of raising calves, which she then takes to auction to be sold to other ranchers. She makes sure that her female cows produce calves by having enough bulls around so the cows get pregnant. She owns about 22 head of cattle, one bull for every 10 cows—all Black Angus cattle.

She maintains her own ranch of about 200 deeded acres and works McCuistion’s cattle as well, routinely checking his cattle, gates, and waters.

“She’s a super good rancher and likes cattle. She takes care of hers and takes care of mine. So that works well,” 95-year-old McCuistion said. She goes over to help herd his cattle and check on the calves, and has dinner with him every night to keep him company.

Getting a late start into the ranching and cattle raising industry, only having handled cattle since 2008, Peterson has picked up a lot of knowledge from other ranchers in the area. She feels the ranching community has accepted her.

While Peterson does most of the work herself, she does have help. Her son, Thor, 30, has ridden and been around horses since he was two. He helps his mom out with daily ranch duties like branding the cattle, castrating the bulls, fixing fencing and putting out salt licks and hay for the animals. When it is time to castrate or brand the cattle, Thor and Peterson herd them on horseback through the hills and along the ridge, down into either their corrals at RedRock or to McCuistion’s ranch, where there are specially-made corrals used for branding and cutting designed by McCuistion himself.

“Working with my mom, it’s like working with a friend,” Thor said. “It doesn’t get much better than that.”

They work side by side, tackling everything that the ranch throws at them. “We’re going to keep ranching until we can’t ranch anymore,” he said.

Thor is also a silversmith, and has made custom spurs, bits and belt buckles for his mom. When he is not ranching, he is working in his silversmith shop, creating custom cowboy art like iron bridle bits, spurs, and jewelry.

Something that makes Peterson stand out as a rancher is her gentleness toward her animals. When she distributes bales of hay to her cows, they walk right up to her and let her feed them straight from her hand.

“You animals tell you so much—I like to have my cattle know me on foot, on the quad, in the truck and on the horse. I just like to have them know me from all angles,” Peterson said. “I have a problem that they’re over-gentle,” she said. She said they don’t blink twice when she comes around on horse or on foot. That could be a problem for others who get too close. “Since I do most of the work, I’d rather have them over-gentle.” With a small herd, she knows each and every one.

When Peterson comes upon some cows shuffling through the creek water, her dogs run over to them to herd them. The cows start mooing in disagreement at being moved by Zorrita, one of Peterson’s two heifers.

Peterson checks their protein barrels, water, and where the cattle are moving to and from. She also checks the animals and listens to hear if any are bawling. As she passes her cows, she greets them as if they were humans. “Hello girls,” she said.

At the end of the day, as Peterson came back up the creek towards her house through the tall, yellow grass, she hopped off Sis and led her back to her corral, hugging her once more as her dogs trailed behind her.

Chris Peterson with her horse, Sis, on her ranch in Patagonia

By Briannon Wilfong

Photo by Briannon Wilfong

Peterson’s herd is known for being friendly. They walk right up to her and let her feed them straight from her hand.
A Historic Year for PUHS Boys’ Basketball

By Aiya Cancio

The ball was in the air when the final buzzer rang. Fans in The Gregory School’s gym in Tucson watched with hope or dread, as the basketball hit the backboard. One player from the home team collapsed onto the court in defeat, as his teammates dropped their heads with dejection.

The visiting players from Patagonia Union High School ran into the stands to celebrate with family and friends. They had just upset The Gregory School Hawks on their homecourt to keep the season alive. For the first time in four years, Patagonia Union High School had advanced past the first round of the State playoffs to become part of the ‘Elite 8’ in the 1A conference for the state of Arizona, a feat that head coach Nate Porter called “potentially the best season in Patagonia Union High School boys’ history.”

PUHS and The Gregory School are in the same Arizona 1A South league, so they play each other often. The Lobos had matched up against the Hawks twice this season already - losing by 4 points in December, and then winning by 7 points in a February game. The first win against the Hawks, however, was played without senior guard Josiah Prior, The Gregory School’s captain and star. The upset win on Feb. 15 further intensified the rivalry between the two schools.

In order to be a part of history, Patagonia had to pull off the biggest upset of their program and fight their way to a win in a drama-filled game against a team they had never beaten prior to this year. Going into the playoffs, the Patagonia Lobos were a No. 13 seed, while The Gregory School Hawks were a No. 4 seed. It was the kind of game that every sports fan loves to watch, and every athlete wants to win.

With only a minute and 30 seconds left to play in the game, The Gregory School led 53-50. Hawks captain Josiah Prior began taunting Lobos fans, waving them goodbye as Patagonia fans’ hopes of victory began to slip.

But then the magic happened. On Patagonia’s final possession, the ball hovers around 100, Patagonia Union High School’s high school sports teams, the kids in Patagonia have grown up playing basketball at the park together, so it’s only natural that a number of them compete together for their school.

Despite losing their graduating seniors, the Lobos will bring back their young core talent next season. The future is brighter than ever in Patagonia after Lalo Aguilar and Julian Vasquez earned second team region awards and Santiny Aguilar made honorable mention. Coach Porter was awarded “Coach of the Year” in his very first season with the Lobos.

This season may be over, but the people of Patagonia are already excited for the next one. And one thing is clear: Patagonians love their basketball.
An hour southeast of Tucson, the communities of Elgin and Sonoita sit at more than 4,000 feet above sea level. Rolling hills covered in golden grasses slowly transition into towering mountains. Roaming cattle dot the hills. This area of high desert – with unreliable rainfall, tough soil, and scorching summer temperatures – may at first glance seem ill-fit to provide a suitable environment for any type of crop.

But, this is wine country. Elgin and Sonoita, which have a combined population of 979 according to the 2010 U.S. Census, are home to 17 wineries registered with the Arizona Department of Liquor.

Vineyards have shown up in the area since the 1970s, but winemakers still struggle to meet government regulations and face environmental challenges. Additionally, the coronavirus has caused a significant loss of earnings this year.

Southern Arizona’s modern wine industry was created in large part thanks to Dr. Gordon Dutt, a researcher from the University of Arizona. Dutt established Arizona’s first modern commercial vineyard in 1979, and co-authored an extensive study in 1980 detailing the winemaking potential of Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico - commonly referred to as The Four Corners Report.

According to Erik Berg, an Arizona wine industry historian, the report’s publication and the publicity around Dutt’s winery helped spark Southern Arizona’s wine industry.

Another development that helped the growth of the industry was the passage of the Domestic Farm Winery Bill by Arizona legislature in 1982. When passed, the bill allowed in-state wineries to produce 75,000 gallons of wine per year and sell directly to consumers.

“IT was absolutely essential in order for the industry to become viable,” Berg said. But, even with the passage of the bill, the growth of the Southern Arizona wine industry has been slow and full of obstacles.

“One of the biggest challenges – and it’s still true to this day - was from a financial standpoint. If you wanted to start a vineyard, you had to buy large pieces of land, put in all your irrigation, and then you plant your vines,” Berg said. “Then, you have three to four years before you have any real harvest you can do anything with. All the while, you took out these big loans with no way to pay them.”

Additionally, most of the early winery and vineyard owners in Southern Arizona “had never owned a winery before or been a full-time professional employed by a winery or vineyard,” Berg said. Almost all of them, he adds, were hobbyists who were just getting into winemaking for the first time.

Though good wines were being made from the beginning, the wines produced from the region lacked consistent quality, Berg said.

The financial difficulty of starting a winery, in addition to inexperience, the general lack of effective marketing and multiple occurrences of Pierce’s disease, a bacterium that destroys wine grapes, caused many wineries to close in Southern Arizona.

“The majority of the vineyards and wineries that started between 1980s and the late 1990s didn’t really make it,” Berg said. “They fizzled out, usually after a few years.”

The wineries that did survive were originally limited by a 75,000-gallon-per-year state production cap, set by the Arizona Farm Winery Bill.

Currently, the cap is 40,000 gallons and wineries may only produce half of that limit to retain self-distribution rights, according to the Arizona Department of Liquor website.

With some wineries choosing to stay within the self-distribution limit, there is less Arizona wine on the market, which means less exposure for the industry outside of the state.

However, national recognition and praise for wineries like Callaghan Vineyards and Dos Cabezas WineWorks from critics such as Robert Parker Jr., helped bolster both the exposure and prestige of wineries in Southern Arizona in the 1990s. Today, wineries across the state are receiving awards and positive reviews, further improving the visibility of Arizona wine.

But, even with this recognition, Southern Arizona wine growers still have difficulty gaining interest outside the Southwest and proving their wines’ quality and legitimacy to the national wine industry.

Kelly and Todd Bostock, the owners of Dos Cabezas WineWorks, were travelling out-of-state shortly after being named one of 10 “Rising Star Vintners” by the San Francisco Chronicle in 2015. They stopped at a local wine store in New York to see what they carried and to pick up a bottle. The store had a shelf dedicated to the San Francisco Chronicle’s “Rising Star Vintners,” but the Bostocks could not find any bottles from their winery on the shelf.

“It’s almost like they saw Arizona, and said ‘Arizona? That must be a fluke,’” Todd Bostock said. “It was really frustrating.”

For Bostock, distinguishing and certifying quality Arizona wines is the best way to gain the trust of consumers. The Bostocks are founding members of The Arizona Vigneron Alliance, a local group developing quality standards and a certification process to build more trust for wines with the Alliance’s seal of approval.

The issue is, however, that not all the wines submitted for the Alliance’s seal will be of high enough quality to receive the certification.

“How do you convince your peers to submit their wines for this approval process, knowing that some of their wines just aren’t good enough to be certified?” Bostock wondered aloud.

Regional winemakers have plenty of things to worry about: new county health codes, a dropping water table, wildfires and the proposed mining activity. Recently, all the issues are overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tasting rooms, which provide much-needed income for the wineries, are closed. “March, April, and May are [the wineries’] heaviest season for selling and having tastings,” said Kat Crockett, a local grape grower. “That’s when they bank money and put it into reserve for harvest time, when it’s time to pay for the grapes. And they’ve been shut down for almost that entire period. So now, they’re saying ‘how are we going to pay for the grapes?’”

Winery hosts prepare to greet visitors behind a display of award winning wines at Callaghan Vineyards in Elgin.
What I Learned During the Pandemic

By Aiya Cancio

I wake up every morning, I open my windows and I go outside. I see how beautiful everything is around me. Every day.

In the beginning, I cried a lot. During a whirlwind week, I spent Spring Break in Vegas, packed up my entire life in Tucson, and reunited with my family.

I feel like most of us can pinpoint the moment we realized everything was really real. For me, it was when I got the news notification that NBA player Rudy Gobert had tested positive for COVID-19 on March 11th. Shortly after, the NBA season was suspended. My mom texted me to come home.

The next morning, amidst what seemed like breaking news every other minute, I drove seven straight hours from Las Vegas back to Tucson. I crammed my car with all of my belongings, said goodbye to everyone I saw regularly, and moved into my parents’ guest house.

The Emails that Changed my Senior Year

By Vianney Cardenas

Every day, around 6:19 a.m., I am woken up by the sound of a jump rope whipping the wooden floor of my home. My brother is jumping away in the living room as if no one is around, or much less, asleep. I take a big sigh and bury my head in my pillow, or much less, asleep. I take a big swallow.

At first, my new routine went like this: Wake up, think about what’s happening in the world, stress, worry, maybe take a break from thinking, stretching and worrying and do other stuff, read doomscary articles and cry myself to sleep.

That same whirlwind week ended with my dad telling me and my brother, Zak, on the day after my mom’s birthday, that she wasn’t acting how she usually did. Apparently the last time my mom was like “this,” my dad said, I was about ten years old; my brother was eight. The time before that, I was maybe five.

The next morning, I woke up to a missed call and a message from my grandmother saying that my mom had had some sort of “breakdown” the night before. I drove to my grandmother’s house and opened the front door to the smell of what I later found out to be tons of candles she had lit overnight.

My grandmother said my mom had spent the entire night at her house, rearranging books, hanging artwork, organizing silverware and wine bottles, and taking breaks periodically to check on my grandmother and see if she was still alive.

Soon after she told me this, my dad came over to trade stories with my grandmother and I had never heard before, stories about my mom that I couldn’t believe were true, things that the rest of my family had worked so hard to hide from me. He walked into every room in the house, checking to see what my mom had moved around, breaking into the candles she had lit along the way.

For two weeks my mom slept maybe two hours a night. She went to sleep very early and woke up at 10 or 11 p.m. to start cleaning for the day. She scrubbed her hands so much they cracked and bled.

In lockdown, spending most of my time at home, my routine quickly changed to revolve around her. Keeping up with the rapidly changing world was not important.

On the nights my dad was at work, my brother and I took turns staying up with her until he got home. On the worst night, my mom came into the living room and told the two of us stories about her dad and her brother and things I couldn’t believe were even possible. We all cried; eventually, she went to sleep. Zak and I went to the guest house and sat on the floor to cry some more.

A week ago I was calling my dad at his work at the Pima County Sheriff’s Department at 2 a.m., asking him what I should do because Mom was suddenly up for the day, showered, dressed, and ready to drive over to my grandmother’s house. He told me to take her car keys and take mine as well.

A few days later, another email from the university titled “Commencement Update” lit up my phone. I hesitantly opened it to read what I had been expecting, but certainly not wanting.

“I am so sorry to have to announce yet one more difficult but necessary decision regarding the most important event we have on campus all year, Commencement,” the university president wrote. With this simple sentence, everything that I had been working towards became something I would never get to experience. Amidst all the chaos surrounding me, this has been one of the hardest pills to swallow.

I am normally not one to celebrate myself or attract attention in any form. I’d rather keep to myself in any and all situations. However, there was something about graduation in May that led me to be okay with celebrating and bringing attention to the work I’ve done. Now, not only has it been taken away from me but also from thousands of others who have worked just as much, if not more.

On one hand, I have friends and family expressing their sympathy for how it all played out. On the other, I hear people saying “It’s just a graduation. You should be grateful you’re healthy and safe.” I agree. I am healthy, I have a roof over my head and I’m safe. But my pain is not solely rooted in the fact that I won’t have a graduation ceremony. It has never been about photos, celebrations, or ceremonies. It’s way deeper than that: it’s about finally being proud of myself for accomplishing a goal and hearing someone say they’re proud of me, too. It’s about believing in myself and being seen for accomplishments.

As I sit here trapped in these four white walls, I can’t help but feel an immense sadness overcome me. I realize that I can’t rely on my family, on others or on a ceremony to be proud of myself. I need to find that all on my own. Who knows, maybe that breakthrough will occur during this period of isolation or maybe it will occur when I’m older, if I’m lucky enough to continue getting to know the world. But I know one day it will come. For now, I will continue to stay home and continue to be woken up by that annoying jump rope.
Smuggling in Santa Cruz is Nothing New

By Conor Villines

On February 27, an unfinished tunnel for smuggling drugs connecting Santa Cruz County to the Mexican state of Sonora was discovered by American and Mexican Border Patrol personnel. The secret underground tunnel began inside a drainage system under Nogales, Sonora and ended inside its American sister city.

It is one of many border tunnels found in recent years, but smuggling is not a recent phenomenon. A little over a century ago, evidence shows that Santa Cruz County had a smuggling problem, too. The Nogales Daily Morning Oasis’s February 13, 1918 edition reported a “large quantity of opium for smoking” - 76 tin cans-worth - discovered during a stakeout by American Customs officials months earlier and eventually turned over to U.S. Army medical personnel.

Cesario Fernandez, who lived in Arizona, was accused and sent to trial in Tucson. According to the newspaper, Customs inspectors were aware of the substance stash for a week before Fernandez ordered it delivered to him. Each tin can full of opium was worth $40 of gold, and the Nogales Daily Morning Oasis reported it was worth double once sold in the United States.

The June 8 edition of the Daily Morning Oasis reported at least two new smuggling stories on the same day. The paper’s front page detailed “one of the most sensational [trial cases] ever known in this region” in which four U.S. Customs officials accused two Americans and two Mexicans of a “conspiracy to smuggle opium and cocaine into the United States.”

It was alleged that 17-year-old Robert Encinas had driven a car packed with a can of cocaine and 50 cans of opium from the Sonoran side of Nogales into the American side. American customs officials said they “knew the contraband was coming in that car, and let it pass [through the border] for the purpose of catching the accused parties with the goods.” The American defendants said that they, Encinas and a Mexican border guard were asked by the customs officials to smuggle and sell the drugs so that the officials could learn who was buying drugs in Arizona. The cans of “drugs” were found to hold nothing more than molasses and manufacturing salt.

Just as they do today along the border, encounters sometimes turned violent. On July 25, 1926, popular Border Patrol inspector Lon Parker was tracking liquor smugglers in eastern Santa Cruz County. Later that day, the Wills family found Parker dying from a gunshot wound on their ranch. Nogales’ Border Vidette newspaper speculated that he had been ambushed by smugglers. Nearby the bodies of a smuggler and his horse, with “a heap of discharged [bullet] cartridges at hand and a large quantity [20 gallons] of contraband liquor,” lay on the ground.

A disturbingly similar event connects those frontier Arizona days to our own. In 2010 a Border Patrol unit encountered and attempted to apprehend five men connected to smuggling within Santa Cruz County. The suspects were part of a “rip crew,” which stole from rival drug and human traffickers in remote areas. Border agent Brian Terry was fatally wounded when the groups exchanged gunfire.

Border Patrol Agent Jesus Vasavilbaso says illegal smuggling remains widespread after a century of crackdowns. In December 2019, another international tunnel was identified in Nogales, along with 200 pounds of narcotics and two men accused of smuggling the drugs. Just under 130 tunnels have been found in Santa Cruz County since 1990.

“While our checkpoint near Sonoita and Patagonia isn’t as busy as Nogales,” agent Vasavilbaso said, referring to the border checkpoint along state route 83, “it is a huge deterrence to smuggling in that community.”

Drug-running organizations have found it lucrative to smuggle both drugs and undocumented migrants. “The checkpoint along Interstate 19 gets stuff all the time,” said Vasavilbaso. In addition to apprehending over 63,000 undocumented migrants in fiscal year 2019, agents interdicted more than 60,000 pounds of narcotics.

A century ago, border bandits aimed to supply contraband to American markets and use the profits to recover from the violence of Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution. Today, Santa Cruz County borderlands are still a gateway for smuggled contraband, part of a long story of people and goods crossing unregulated through Santa Cruz County communities.

New Life for Historic Buildings

By Ray Diaz

Classrooms that used to be full of students are now filled with artifacts that depict the history of Patagonia. The Patagonia Museum is one of several restored historic buildings that now serve a different purpose with hopes that they will continue to teach visitors the value of preserving the town’s history.

The building, known as “Old Main,” was a school from 1914 until May 2014. It reopened as a museum in 2016. The school was originally a brick building but was stuccoed over in the 1950s. It was painted white with maroon shutters that match the color of the Spanish tile roof.

German Quiroga, president of the Patagonia Museum, says that visitors are pleased to see it being maintained, especially those who grew up in the region and went to school there.

“It is possible to be inside the building where they went to school or their mom and dad went to school,” Quiroga said. “I don’t know what it is about it, but people enjoy it. They are happy to see it kept up and kept in place.”

As you walk around the museum, old brown wooden planks squeak with each step. Large LED lights hang from the ceiling to brighten the rooms.

Each former classroom now displays what made the town of Patagonia unique: The “Ranching Heritage” room showcases old leather cowboy boots and saddles used by nearby ranchers. The “Centennial Celebration” room honors the town’s centennial in 1998.

The “Journey Stories” room holds old school supplies like individual chalkboards, rusted metal compasses and dictionaries with cracked spines. Most of the artifacts have been donated, according to Quiroga. “It gives our community a sense of place and something to remember so we don’t forget what it was like,” He said.

“Anything we can do to promote our history, spreading the word about our history and appreciation and awareness of our history.”

The Patagonia Museum was the second historic school building in eastern Santa Cruz County that Quiroga helped restore. Her first project began in 2009, when she found out that the Lochiel Schoolhouse was in disrepair and had been vandalized. Before the renovations, the schoolhouse had shattered windows and even bullet holes in the walls.

Most of the work done on the Lochiel Schoolhouse was completed by local volunteers, though people from as far away as Wisconsin participated in renovations. “We do have a volunteer list; I have counted it, it’s easily over 100, maybe reaching 200 people that have come out,” Quiroga said.

Patagonia reuses a lot of its buildings. A former meat market is now a Seventh-day Adventist Church. The old railroad depot is now Patagonia Town Hall. Patagonia Lumber Company is now a pilates studio.

Another re-purposed building is Cady Hall, which opened as a hotel in 1901 and now serves as the Patagonia Public Library. The establishment used to host guests for a night’s stay, but now it hosts interested minds, offering them books and digital items to read, as well as opportunities to learn more about the local history.

According to the Patagonia Public Library website, it’s restoration began in 1990 when the Cady Hall Restoration committee raised $250,000 in donations and grants and used them to help the Hall remain useful. “Through donations and a lot of advocacy they were able to save the library,” Library Director Laura Wenzel said. Wenzel said that the restoration process has been an ongoing project over the years. It needed much more than just basic building restoration.

“While the foyers, one of the bathrooms, and the kitchen had to be completely rebuilt, “I do think it is important for people to still be able to access and use these amazing feats of architecture,” Wenzel said. Preservation is important to Patagonians, she noted. “You have to listen to what the community wants and the community wants these buildings to be preserved and taken care of for as long as possible,” She said.
backup,” he said. “If we didn’t have anyone in the area, we didn’t have anyone to send. Now that we have the manpower, we have guys that are available all the time.”

At any given time of the day or night, 20 to 30 agents will be on shift - some patrolling the highway, some posted throughout the mountains. “Border Patrol has so many agents, they’re basically everywhere,” said Fire Chief DeWolf. “They’re first on scene and can size up what we’re getting into.”

These border patrol agents also come with an intimate familiarity of the many rugged back roads surrounding Elgin, Patagonia and Sonoita, knowledge critical for local emergency response.

“We run around this country all the time so we know where the fence lines are,” said Bartine. “We can get to any part of the community.” Sue Archibald, a Sonoita resident whose neighborhood was evacuated for the 2017 Encino fire, remembers how Border Patrol, “jumped right in and made themselves available however they could,” as the fire raged through the community.

In a region of grasslands that Bartine refers to as “one big tinder box,” extra hands are regularly needed. DeWolf said his fire department gets approximately 600 calls annually; Border Patrol agents act as first responders for around 50% of them. The other 50% DeWolf described as minor calls, not requiring additional support.

Most situations are routine: on average, local Border Patrol agents rescue at least five hikers per year, respond to one car crash per week, pull tourists’ vehicles out of muddy ditches every monsoon season, and change countless tires, according to Bartine.

Other situations, such as domestic abuse calls, are less common. “There’s a lot of stuff we’re not trained for,” said Bartine, “but we have to deal with it anyways.” Though Border Patrol legally can’t enforce non-federal laws, such as speeding, drug use, or theft, they can still contain situations while waiting for local law-enforcement to arrive - typically a wait of at least an hour. The rapid response time can prevent a critical injury from becoming fatal.

In this alternate role, local agents contort their identity as border enforcers. “We kind of have to put on a different hat,” said Bartine. “Take off your BP hat, put on your EMT hat, and we have to interchange them all the time.”

The duality can complicate some community members’ opinions of the agency; even those who oppose border security, particularly ideology or actions that may still find themselves thankful for their help. Bartine distinguishes the two roles: there is BP’s primary mission, border enforcement, and then there is helping the community.

“We have plenty of people that don’t agree with the primary mission for sure, but when we put Patagonia Fire Department to a house fire in Patagonia, it’s hard to disagree with us being out there,” he said.

The help isn’t entirely selfless: the new 2020 Border Patrol strategy emphasized community involvement, according to Bartine. “I think the Border Patrol realized the need for the community to be involved and as supportive as they will be with the mission,” he said. “We’re helping in any way with the community is a big bonus.”

Border Patrol counts on ranchers and other community members to alert agents of illegal border activity. Increased cooperation can also mean a decrease in headaches. Local agents still encounter their share of hostility and idealism actions at the Border Patrol checkpoint just north of Sonoita.

But in Sonoita, unlike in Naco where he was formerly stationed, Bartine said he doesn’t mind the community knowing he’s a Border Patrol agent. He lives there, his children go to school there, and he’s a familiar face to most. It’s what Archibald refers to as a ‘rural relationship.’

When the U.S. government shut down in 2018, and the Border Patrol agents stopped being paid, some local community members stepped in to help. “A lot of us took collections, bought gas cards and handed them out to our agents,” said Archibald.

“They’re people we depend on, we try to help them.”

But the dependency on border patrol comes with no guarantees. If a border wall replaces the current vehicle barriers, the local agents’ shifts will likely change.

Instead of patrolling the entire region, Bartine anticipates that agents would have to lock into positions at intervals along the wall’s length — a strategy commonly used along already walled portions of the border. With this significantly reduced mobility, local Border Patrol would likely lose their capacity to respond to community emergencies.

For up close Sonoita Station agents are free to roam, and free to act as first responders.

By Vianney Cardenas

Despite the ups, downs and sharp turns, Arizona 83 between Interstate-10 and Sonoita is a unique and enjoyable ride. Flat desert terrain gives way to rolling hills studded with trees, brush and grasses along the scenic highway.

Also present are the Border Patrol vehicles that begin to appear where a tent and bright orange traffic cones mark the Sonoita U.S. Customs and Border Patrol checkpoint.

There are approximately 11 border checkpoints in the Tucson sector, which covers 262 miles of the southwest border and remains one of the busiest in the region. They are used by Border Patrol to deter migrants and smuggling activities that have made it to the United States.

Additionally, there are nine Border Patrol stations located in Casa Grande, Tucson, Nogales, Why, Willcox, Sonoita, Bisbee, Douglas, and Three Points, where agents monitor the activity occurring in the field, according to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

The small Sonoita checkpoint is approximately 25 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border fence in Nogales. Many Border Patrol agents don’t see the fence as the most important asset for detecting and apprehending migrants.

“Our utilize the fence as a tool, we know people can jump over it, we know people can dig underneath it,” said Border Patrol agent Daniel Hernandez. “A lot of people think Border Patrol relies on the fence to keep somebody in or out. We don’t. We utilize it to buy us time.”

To Border Patrol agents, border enforcement technology is a main factor in making apprehensions. Camera towers, scanners, ground sensors and radar systems, first implemented in the 1980s and 1990s, might be the biggest and most successful tools ever used by the Border Patrol, according to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

In the past, Border Patrol agents were sent out to hilltops with a set of binoculars to look for migrant activity. Now, the technology being used can do the same work as an agent, if not more, according to Hernandez. With just the camera towers alone, there are around 20 different angles that can pick up movement within a six mile radius.

Ground sensors have been used for many years, but Border Patrol is currently phasing them out and integrating more camera-based technology, said Joseph Curran, a Border Patrol agent of the Tucson Sector Strategic Communication Branch.

There are several different types of camera towers, some of which are used in urban areas and some in rural, rugged, isolated areas. Some of the camera towers carry high definition cameras that can pick up clear features in order to identify a subject; others are used for radar surveillance, and others are mobile camera towers that can be placed in the back of a Border Patrol truck and stationed in areas where there is an influx of traffic or activity.

When the sensors detect any movement from people driving nearby, they immediately alert Border Patrol dispatch agents. “Dispatch analyzes what caused the camera to go off and if appropriate, sends an agent to investigate,” Curran said. “The Border Patrol wants the right response to the right incursion. The ability to see what is on camera in real time can best help us do that.”

This technology has also helped agents to assist migrants in distress, according to Curran. Migrants traveling north come from many countries around the world: El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba, and Russia, to name a few. Sometimes, they run into trouble on the way. “I have also seen many occasions in which migrants who are lost, start small fires which are detected by Border Patrol technology,” Curran said. Migrants may start small fires in the desert to alert anyone nearby that they are present and in need of help.

Border Patrol also leaves rescue beacons on the ground where migrants can activate when they are in distress. “When activated, Border Patrol agents provide a swift and definitive response to the migrants in need of help,” Curran added.

There is always a small chance that the enforcement technology can fail or make false detections, according to Curran. A report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released in March 2018 shows that Border Patrol “has not yet used available data to determine the contribution of surveillance technologies to border security efforts.”

The Secure Border Initiative Network (SBInet), a 2006 program to install cameras, scanners and towers along the border, failed after the GAO reported several technical problems. Cameras weren’t picking up human images, sensors and radars were making false detections and the environment didn’t allow for the products to work successfully. Approximately $1 billion went into this program, according to a May 2011 report.

Border enforcement technology has improved over the years, with better quality hardware and software, and the agency has hired agents who are experienced with the technology being used. “The only negative I would consider is the possibility that technology can fail,” Curran said. “Although unlikely, there is always the possibility.”
Harvest Christian Church Attracting New Followers

By Pei-Yu Lin

Gardenia Moffett walked onto the raised platform covered in gray carpet at Harvest Christian Fellowship in Sonoita on the last Sunday in February. She took the microphone and welcomed the congregation. Sophia Bergh, 17, the training leader for youth in the church, stood beside her. Recorded music started playing and they began to sing. “I raise a Hallelujah. Our weapon is a melody,” as the congregation joined in. Some of the 26 congregants stood up and swayed their bodies with a literal rhythm.

Tom Moffett was just off stage, looking at his wife and singing along. The Moffetts are senior pastors at the Harvest Christian Fellowship, one of six Christian churches in the Sonoita area. Since they came to serve in Sonoita in August 2018, they have tried out new ways to attract churchgoers.

Young generation in the church

The congregation has grown slightly and gotten younger since the Moffetts arrived. More young people and families with children have started to come to the church, Tom Moffett said.

“It was probably about 30 [at the beginning], but what happens is people leave and people come. So, we’re kind of reaching a new demographic of people, a little bit younger demographic in a small church,” he explained. Tom estimated that the congregation numbers about 40 people now.

Bergh, a student in Benson High School, is a leader in training at the church. She helps lead the worship and plan youth activities. She says she became a Christian at age 10, and last January, started to come to the Harvest Christian Fellowship with her father and her brother. “We wanted to find a new church with exciting pastors. We wanted something with more of the youth program,” she said.

“Pastor Tom is just really energetic. He’s really good at getting fired up about kids,” she said.

Bergh loves to sing contemporary music, which is often accompanied by drums and electric guitars. It makes the congregation want to dance and sing more than the older hymns found in “stricter” churches, she said.

Bergh said the pastors usually open the Sunday worship with “peppy” and “fast-paced” songs to “get people excited about worship,” and afterwards, they normally transition to slower, more heartfelt songs. It “helps diminish the feeling of a strict religion when being in church,” Bergh said.

Before coming to Harvest, Bergh and her family went to Canelo Cowboy Church. That church’s Senior Pastor, Steve Lindsey, described the style of the music provided in the Canelo Church as “country music, “upbeat,” “old-fashioned style” and is usually accompanied on guitars. According to Lindsey, the mission of the Canelo church, established in 2006, is to reach the working cowboy and those interested in the Western lifestyle.

“Canelo was a great church, but they didn’t have contemporary music,” Bergh said. “The music was different, and I was becoming less interested in horses.” Instead of ranching or rodeo, Bergh’s hobbies are rock climbing and paddle boarding. For her career plan, she is considering joining the military and studying medicine.

Beside preaching the gospel, the church also has a Christ-centered homeschool ministry, called “Homeschooler,” where young families gather once a week in the church to provide classes and activities for the children. Most of the time, the parents take turns teaching the group. However, homeschool service has been suspended since mid-March because of the COVID-19 virus. Face-to-face Sunday worship is also on hold, although the church did hold a modified Easter service.

“Many of these families don’t attend Harvest. They attend elsewhere, but they come here for the homeschool co-op, which is pretty exciting,” Gardenia said.

“We are not specifically marketing or trying to attract a certain age group,” Gardenia said.

She said young families have been drawn to Harvest Christian Church because of the “radical grace” they find there. “We are a grace-oriented Kingdom community that accepts and loves people exactly where they are. This is who we are,” Gardenia said.

Cultivating public speaking skills

After singing a few songs, Gardenia welcomed Tom to the stage to start his speech for that day’s worship. Tom shared the story of Jesus’ life with the congregation and showed an animated video about the holy city, Jerusalem.

It was a special day for the Moffetts: it was a day after Gardenia’s birthday, and they wanted to share their happiness with the congregation.

Tom invited the congregation to sing a happy birthday song to Gardenia, which they did, smiling and applauding.

“Thank you, Pastor Sweetie.” That’s how Gardenia referred to her husband after the song. Suddenly, Tom pointed at someone off the stage, and said, “Hey, you don’t call me Pastor Sweetie. Only her!” Tom’s humor triggered another laugh from the crowd.

Tom’s public speaking skills aren’t in his genes.

As far as public speaking, you do it,” Tom said. Tom was an athlete who signed with two NFL teams for a short time when he was 23. “What happens is when people hear NFL, they want you to come speak.” That’s when Tom started to practice public speaking and realized that he enjoys talking to the people in the church.

Tom went to postgraduate school for theology to get more training. He had worked for churches in Texas and Phoenix as a senior pastor and an executive pastor, respectively, before he came to Sonoita.

“I’m there [became a pastor in the church] because I believe it. Because it’s a passion. It’s coming from my life,” Tom said.

Christianity amid the pandemic

Tom and Gardenia usually post information about the church on Tom Moffett’s Facebook fan page. After the outbreak of COVID-19 in mid-March, they started to run a YouTube channel, KingdomComTV, to keep preaching the gospel online.

The Youtube Channel had 25 subscribers as of April 20.

“It’s [the Youtube Channel] been very positive,” Tom said. “We use social media to let people know and we interact that way.”

The Moffetts also pray with the fellowship through phone calls and continue to do Bible studies via Zoom.

The church is still assisting Borderlands Produce Rescue, a non-profit organization which rescues fresh produce in Santa Cruz County, to host food distribution service “Produce on Wheels.”

“This region is a food desert. If you’re not growing your own produce, you’re driving for it. Bringing fresh produce to the area is meeting a need for all,” Gardenia said.

In addition to food distribution, the Moffetts also started a toilet paper donation dropbox.

After getting permission from health officials and the Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Department, the Moffetts held Easter service in a different way. Parishioners signed up for a time and came into the church with a group of less than 10 people. The Moffetts then shared sermons, prayed, sang songs and held communion with them.

“We separated their chairs. We did it outside. We’ve held a mini-service for them. If they had children, we had a team of people over in the playground and those people could go in and play,” Tom said.

After kids left, their team wiped down the whole playground and cleaned the tables. Around 30 to 40 people participated in the Easter service, Tom estimated.

“It was hard for Gardenia and I. We were out there all day. But, the families loved it,” Tom said.

Tom and Gardenia also published an article, titled “Easter in the Time of COVID-19,” in the April Issue of Patagonia Regional Times to tell the story of the resurrection of Jesus.

“I would speak of coronavirus because people are so fearful. That’s where they’re living … because fear and corona and all those things are relevant, then I would try to be relevant to where people are in their life,” Tom said.

“We believe the church is not a building with four walls. The church is people. Whether they ever decide to visit Harvest Church is beside the point. We are the hands and feet of Jesus in our communities and we can love people right where they are,” Gardenia said.
Fire Season Preparations Modified In Response to COVID-19

By Conor Villines

April and May are traditionally the start of fire season. Sonoita-area residents have seen years when the blazes begin this time of year and continue for months until the monsoon season.

This year, the district has to find new ways to get ready. “Because of the cautions about spreading coronavirus, firefighting this season is going to look different than anything we’ve ever seen before,” said Sonoita-Elgin Fire Chief Joseph DeWolf.

Normally preparations start with an eight-hour, all-day refresher course. Not unlike military boot camp candidates, members of the district, from the chief all the way down to entry-level volunteers, must walk three miles while carrying 45-pound packs in under 45 minutes. This march is followed by four hours of classroom time, where participants review anticipated weather patterns, including storm cycles and dry spells during the upcoming fire season. They then review efficient fire-attacking strategies, pump types, water tank setup, and firehose use, along with radio frequencies for communicating within the department and also with law enforcement, Border Patrol, and more.

Much of the training this Spring has taken a new shape because of social distancing directives from the Governor’s Office and the State Fire Marshal. Training is still happening, he said, with only six to ten people a time in order to avoid close contact.

The Sonoita community faces extreme pressures to have their fire department as prepared and rigorously trained as possible. In April 2017, the first fire of the season sparked 120 continuous days with fire on the ground. A lightning strike later started a blaze that destroyed five houses along with thousands of grassland acres.

While residents risk losing a home, ranchers risk losing a wealth of grazing lands which reduces their cattle-feeding capacity for the year. Wine production, hunting, and hicking are equally affected by Santa Cruz County blazes. Tourism businesses rely heavily on firefighters to keep Highways 82 and 83 open. Todd Bostock of Dos Cabezas Wineworks recalls the 2009 fire that burned his house and reduced business in the area.

“We survive on tourism so when big fires happen it affects our business.” Sonoita’s business owners are aware that out-of-town visitors see news of fire and figure they must cancel their plans to visit. This year, business is already slow with people staying at home because of COVID-19.

In order to mitigate the effects of fire, firefighters usually visit residents’ homes and trim weeds anywhere from 30 to 300 feet away from a house — for free.

In normal years Sonoita-Elgin firefighters preemptively burn brush at local ranches when the wind is low and ground is moist. Although preemptive trimmings and burns were postponed this year to prevent social gatherings, the fire district is still ready to serve, albeit with a few more precautions in place.

DeWolf said he is pleased that community members have stepped up and are trimming things themselves. Since firefighters have suspended nonessential visits to peoples’ homes, they are eager to provide locals with guidance about how to keep their yards safe from fire.

Fire season challenges have grown as the district’s population has increased. More homes and wineries are consuming unprecedented amounts of Santa Cruz County’s groundwater, leaving the fire service to be among those competing for what’s left. A declining water table exacerbates the fire department’s challenges to retrieve groundwater through their wells.

“We’ve got shrinking groundwater and dry grasslands,” explains Chief DeWolf. “This sustains a fire season which is now twelve months long.”

At 325 square miles, Sonoita-Elgin is a large area of responsibility for a district with only 13 full time firefighters. This staff is reinforced by 45 volunteers this year.

This force of 58 total responds to over 600 calls for fire and emergency medical assistance a year. The department also reinforces Patagonia’s volunteer department.

“We rely heavily on the Sonoita and Patagonia fire departments,” said Patagonia Mayor Andrea Wood.

“The district is getting a rundown of any symptoms related to COVID-19 to help assess the situation before arriving at local medical calls, and is limiting the number of responders per call. Patagonia firefighters are wearing masks and cleaning their clothes and equipment routinely several times a day to reduce likelihood of infection via their gear.

To make up for a lack of full-time staff, the fire district relies on a strong relationship with the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, as they have first responders and law enforcement of their own to help bolster the fire department’s forces. The two agencies usually conduct monthly training during fire season.

Because of coronavirus, the training has been suspended. It will not resume until given the OK by the state fire marshal’s guidelines. Although training is taking a new shape, Chief DeWolf emphasizes that all agencies are doing internal training and are ready to go for this fire season.

Handling big fires will require a noticeable change in strategy. Large fires are normally fought using large firefighter crews. “I don’t expect to see 25 firefighters standing on the side of the road,” explains Chief DeWolf. Group size will be determined on a case-by-case basis, and the firefighters who show up will be spaced out from one another.

Although regular information meetings at the fire station and the local fairgrounds which educate locals about fire prevention have been postponed to enforce social distancing, education for residents to prevent fires is available on the fire district’s website. “When we teach some homeowners about how to make their homes safe, other homeowners follow suit,” said Chief DeWolf.

“Despite medical or fire threats, it is important for us that we remain open to the public and ready to serve.” His goal is that safety training will spread faster than the fires themselves this upcoming season.
Patagonia, a Stop Along the Arizona Trail

By Devyn Edelstein

Patagonia has a lot of visitors who walk a long way to spend a short time. Former professional cyclist Chuck Veylupek is one. He passed through Patagonia in February, eight days into a four-month, 800-mile trek on the Arizona Trail.

Veylupek, has a beard, grey hair, and the long, lean body of a professional athlete.

He took a break at the Patagonia Public Library to check in with family members and loved ones via email. He sat down, breathing heavily after shedding his backpack full of food, clothes, and other necessities and took a huge sip of water. He wiped his brow, pushed back his gray hair and sighed. Veylupek said he takes his time traveling from town to town.

"What really is going on is you are doing this long hike, in the case of the Arizona Trail, 800 miles, but you are really dividing it into town-to-town excursions essentially." Veylupek said he understands that the lifestyle is not for everyone.

Veylupek is not really in a rush so he spends time exploring each town. "If you are traveling light you are moving a little quicker to get to the next town. I am traveling heavy right now - plenty of food."

"It's a cheap vacation too, that's another thing. Something like this, you know you could spend as much as 3 bucks a mile or as little as 75 cents a mile," Veylupek says, "So, you know all said the whole trip will cost me like a thousand dollars. Which is amazing when you consider four months. Hikers don't spend too much money and time when they are in towns because at the end of the day they want to keep hiking. But they are able to see the towns and share their thoughts with fellow hikers, who may want to explore the town as well.

Veylupek said he planned to stop in Vail and then Summerhaven atop Mount Lemmon to restock his supplies as he continued north.

"I just get my supplies and then get back on the trail and walk a mile or two," he said. "Probably tonight I will get back on the trail. I am here to use wifi and tell loved ones I am alive miles across the state, beginning at the U.S.-Mexico border and ending in Utah. The trail winds through many towns along the way. One of them is in Patagonia, where hikers can experience art, local restaurants, a Nature Conservancy site, and more. Patagonia, 52 miles from the trail's start at the Mexico border, is one of only three gateway communities where the trail goes right through town.

Matt Nelson, executive director of the Arizona Trail Association, said Patagonia is a great stop along the trail. "I think most people in Patagonia are proud that the Arizona Trail passes through their town and as we continue to improve it and share more information with people about what a great resource it is, then hopefully the community can benefit from it," Nelson said.

Lauras Wenzel, the director of the Patagonia Public Library, said she sees plenty of hikers. "Usually they are coming off the trail, and need to get on the internet," Wenzel said. "A lot of them will use our computers or they need a nice place to sort of rest up and get their wits about them, I guess."

The Arizona Trail extends 800 miles across the state, beginning at the U.S.-Mexico border and ending in Utah. The trail winds through many towns along the way. One of them is in Patagonia, where hikers can experience art, local restaurants, a Nature Conservancy site, and more. Patagonia, 52 miles from the trail’s start at the Mexico border, is one of only three gateway communities where the trail goes right through town.

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