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Farrah Khan

IRVINE SWEARING-IN

NEW COUNCIL MEMBERS, NEW MAYOR TAKE OATH TO SERVE.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE CITY OF IRVINE



Mike Carroll

New Irvine City Council members and the mayor were sworn into office on Tuesday, Dec. 8, at City Hall. Farrah Khan was sworn in as mayor, and Tammy Kim, Larry Agran and Mike Carroll, were sworn in to the council.

All the new members of the council were present in-person except for Agran, who joined the ceremony virtually, via Zoom.

"It's obviously a pleasure and honor to be a newly sworn member of the Irvine City Council," Agran said. "I want to take a moment to express my regrets about the awkwardness," referring to being part of the meeting via video. "I recognize going forward this really underscores what will be our shared responsibility and no doubt the top priority of each and every council member and of course our mayor – which is to strengthen our ability to combat the coronavirus pandemic. It's afflicting our community, the entire Orange County community, and the entire country. And I think that this new council is up to the task."

Carroll took the oath office for a second time for the City of Irvine. Carroll was elected to serve a four-year term, after serving a modified term due to the departure of former mayor, now supervisor, Don Wagner and the appointment of Christina Shea into the mayor post in 2019.

Carroll expressed gratitude on Tuesday, thanking all the voters in Orange County for making the 2020 elec-

tion the most successful in terms of voter turnout, which he called, "a testament to democracy," at the local level of government.

"I'd like to first thank the 38,000 or so residents of Irvine, voters that chose me to be a council member in this great city of Irvine, California," Carroll said after taking the oath. "I also want to say thank you for everyone that voted ... for participating at the level at which you did, at the highest turnout in the history of the city of Irvine – it's really an amazing accomplishment particularly in this time of a global pandemic that has reached all the way down here to our community."

First-time, newly elected council member Tammy Kim received the most votes of any candidate in the history of Irvine.

In an interview with Irvine Weekly the morning after Election Night, Kim attributed part of her success to targeting multicultural groups, in a variety of languages.

"Our campaign was reaching out to people in Chinese, in Mandarin, both simplified, as well as traditional, as well as Korean, and Vietnamese – we reached out to all of them."

On Tuesday, Kim expressed her gratitude toward the voters in the city of Irvine, and extended congratulations to her new colleagues on council. She also thanked her mother, father, as well as her son, Christian, who were all watching virtually.

Tammy Kim



"I can't express the pride I feel, being joined by everyone watching here at home," Kim said. "This election, in many ways, has been viewed as historic, which to me is very humbling. For me, it's an incredible opportunity to give back to this city that is global, dynamic and engaged."

Irvine's newly elected mayor, Farrah Khan, spoke last. She thanked her team and family, and said she is looking forward to collaborating with her new council members.

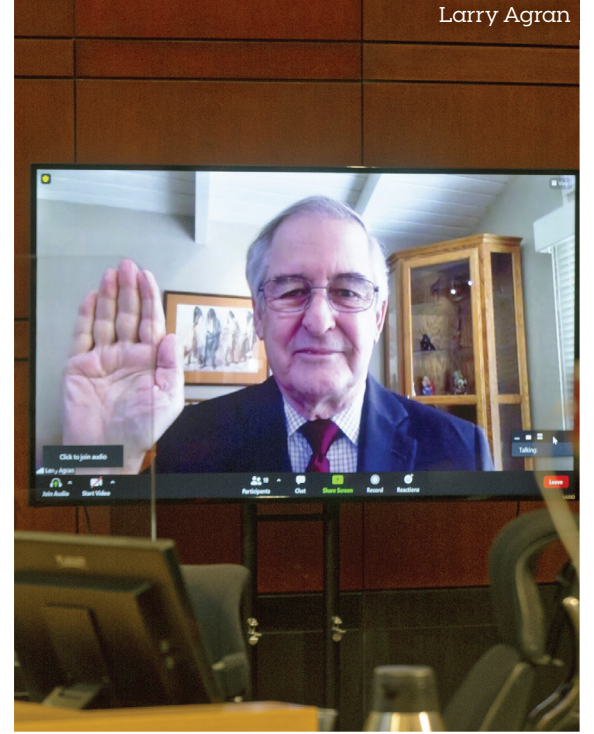
"I see us setting the standard for local governance," she said.

One of her main priorities will be finding strategies to help residents and local businesses recover financially from the pandemic. Khan also has plans to help reduce the spread of COVID-19, by creating a COVID-19 task force.

While Khan said she does not have any specific names to announce for the task force, she added that, "the goal is to have input from health care professionals (including pediatrics and mental health) on best practices for us to protect our community," in an email with Irvine Weekly.

"To the voters of Irvine, thank you for entrusting me with your vote of confidence. You sent a clear message that bold leadership, diverse representation and experience should guide this office in that of the Irvine City Council."

Larry Agran





ORANGE COUNTY COVID-19 UPDATE

VIRUS SURGING IN CALIFORNIA FORCES REGIONAL LOCKDOWNS

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

On the evening of Sunday, Dec. 6, Orange County was placed on a state-mandated three-week regional stay-at-home order due to the record number of rising COVID-19 cases impacting intensive care unit (ICU) capacity.

The three-week order will expire on Dec. 27, affecting not only Orange County, but Los Angeles, Riverside, San Diego, Imperial, Inyo, Mono, San Bernardino, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties as well.

During the first week of December, Orange County reported 9,499 new COVID-19 cases, the county's highest number of weekly cases since the pandemic began and nearly double the number of weekly cases reported during the July peak.

On Tuesday, Dec. 8, Orange County reported 1,671 new COVID-19 cases, with zero deaths. Tuesday's totals bring Orange County's cumulative total to 90,513 confirmed COVID-19 cases, and 1,633 deaths.

As of Tuesday, Dec. 8, there were 946 people hospitalized with 235 in the ICU, according to the Orange County Health Agency.

In an interview with *Irvine Weekly*, Andrew Noymer, Associate Professor, Population Health and Disease Prevention at UC Irvine, said there are still many unknowns about this surging virus, but that we are entering a "crisis stage," and the public should be prepared for "severe" results.

On Dec. 3, Noymer posted a radial plot graph showing the air travel over Thanksgiving weekend. He pointed to the fact it was the first time the Transportation Security Administration recorded 1 million air travelers since mid-March, around the time the pandemic began.

Noymer added that while he applauds the fact that air travel was down in comparison to last year, there should be much less.

"The universe is not some experiment that we can rerun, changing events – so we don't know how much of this is due to Thanksgiving and how much of it is due to it just increasing anyway," Noymer explained

to *Irvine Weekly*. "Whatever it is – there was too much travel during Thanksgiving, given the circumstances."

Per California Gov. Gavin Newsom's lock-down order, some of the sectors that need to close completely are hair salons, barbershops, personal care services, museums, zoos and aquariums. This is a reversal from the previous stay-at-home order, which allowed those businesses to be partially open with specific COVID-19 guidelines in place.

"Regions where the ICU capacity is falling below 15 percent, we are mandating a stay-at-home order for three weeks," Newsom said during a press conference on Thursday, Dec. 3.

The order also restricts non-essential travel state-wide. Primarily, the governor explained, the purpose of the regional stay at home order is "fundamentally predicated on the need to stop gathering with people outside of your household."

The order also asks that the Southern California region shut down bars, breweries and indoor movie theaters – however, in Orange County, movie theaters are allowed to operate outdoors, in a drive-in format.

The order will also force the closure of cardrooms, amusement parks, non-essential travel and sporting events with an audience, although those were already restricted under the county's previous order. Schools will also remain open will waivers. Retail businesses can also remain open at 20 percent of maximum capacity.

The California restaurant industry also faces restrictions, as the regional stay-at-home order calls for the closure of indoor and outdoor dining across the state. However, there has been major resistance to the shutdown from some Orange County restaurant owners.

Chef Andrew Gruel, owner of the Huntington Beach-based Slapfish, which has several locations across the nation, including one in Irvine, has become very outspoken on social media, and made appearances on several news outlets, citing the lack of science behind the governor's orders.

In an interview with *Irvine Weekly*, Gruel explained that California is the only state that is requiring the shutdown of outdoor dining.

"I posted something about – it's OK to be able to support a reasonable opening, under safety precautions while simultaneously taking coronavirus seriously – and I've been saying that since day one," he said. "It's so crazy how this thing has just gotten polarized to the degree at one end of the spectrum, you're either a COVID denier, or on the end of the spectrum you're a communist."

Gruel admitted it was easy to "lob comments" over social media toward Gov. Newsom. But, he said, given the opportunity to speak one-on-one with the governor, he would ask Newsom to look at the situation from the perspective of the small business owner he claims to be.

"Let's look at this realistically," Gruel explained. "As a small business owner I've got over 100 employees in Southern California, how am I supposed to tell them before the holidays that they're all going to get laid off because our sales are going to drop so significantly because we're banning outdoor dining? I would ask [Newsom] to look me in the face and tell me that

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC



outdoor dining is going to increase the risk of coronavirus – especially when the entertainment industry is exempt."

Noymer, however, cautioned the philosophy that outdoor dining is innocent in the spread, and while there might not be hard data associated with it, mixing with others is simply a recipe for the virus to spread.

"It's hard to prove a negative. It's hard to prove it's not something. I think some restaurant owners have taken some liberties with the spirit of the order for outdoor dining. I've personally seen tents with patrons packed in. It's technically outdoors, but it doesn't look safe to me. I don't think restaurants need to be shut down, because takeaway is totally fine," Noymer said during a phone interview with *Irvine Weekly*. "But, it's not obvious to me that restaurants aren't playing a role in this – we're reaching a crisis stage where we really need to take all reasonable precautions."

Noymer added that more should be done at the national level to support small business owners who are struggling.

"There needs to be help for people, and there's no help coming, so people are just like, 'Fuck this shit,' – and you can print that."

As far as enforcement goes, the Orange County Sheriff has taken a hands-off approach to the enforcement of any regional stay-at-home order violations.

HOW FIRST VACCINES WILL BE DISTRIBUTED IN CALIFORNIA

Gov. Gavin Newsom announced that California secured more than 327,000 COVID-19 vaccines, with a possibility of acquiring 2.15 million doses by the end of December.

Newsom detailed the plans for the vaccine, saying they will be distributed in three phases, with doses being prioritized by groups such as critical healthcare workers and long-term care residents.

While this initial test run will be distributed to roughly 163,000 people, when considering the 327,000 vaccines must be given in two doses, Newsom said that there will be more coming to California in January, February and March.

"There is light at the end of this tunnel. We are not in a permanent state – this is a temporary state," Newsom said. "This is the third wave of a pandemic ... with a vaccine that is now being distributed, not by one distributor, but by many different distributors ... that we have been monitoring through our scientific safety review. Help is on the way."

As of this writing, the FDA has not approved the acquired Pfizer vaccine, but Gov. Newsom said it is anticipated to be approved by Thursday, Dec. 10, with the first doses coming in by Tuesday, Dec. 15.

Noymer emphasized that the public should look forward to access to a vaccine within the coming months. However, referencing more of the unknowns, he added that only time would tell if the vaccine would stop transmission, or simply make the COVID-19 illness less severe.

"There's a lot we don't know yet about what the impact of that will be – we don't know if the vaccine is a transmission blocking vaccine, or merely a vaccine that prevents you from getting sick – it might simply convert every illness into a asymptomatic case," he said. "There's a very real possibility that's the case. There's also a very good possibility that it does stop transmission, we just don't know yet."

As for now, Noymer referenced a powerful anecdote and said regardless of the presence of a vaccine, our societal actions as a whole will determine the outcome, severity and duration of this ongoing pandemic.

"The pandemic is us," he said. "The root word 'Demos' in 'pandemic' is the Greek word for 'people' and 'pan' means 'all,' so it's something that happens, 'upon all people' – the pandemic is all of us, it's all of society, acting as a unit. It's not just the virus."

THE BUFFALO SPOT

CREATING A UNIQUE NICHE: THE BUFFALO FRIES.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

The Buffalo Spot has built a fried chicken empire with the help of a simple, yet tasty, niche – buffalo fries. After opening in Long Beach, California in 2013, the Buffalo Spot now has more than 30 locations across California, Arizona and Nevada. The Buffalo Spot has called Irvine home since May 2019.

By popularizing the hashtag #World-FamousBuffaloFries on social media, the Buffalo Spot has created a unique niche for itself by serving heaps of French fries loaded with chopped and dice pieces of hand-breaded fried chicken. The chicken is then sauced with different flavors of “buffalo-style” sauce, with signature flavors like mango habanero, Tajin and pineapple jalapeno.

“Eighty percent of our sales is buffalo fries, where a lot of our competition would be a lot of chicken wing places, like Wingstop and Buffalo Wild Wings. Yet our niche – the Buffalo Fries – that’s what we’re known for,” Matt Martinez, Director of Marketing for the Buffalo Spot, said in an interview with *Irvine Weekly*. “In the past year or so, we’ve been debuting more limited time offerings. We launched mango habanero this year, which was kind of an overdue item, Nashville and Tajin – which was never used as a topping for chicken wings.”

Backed by a team of young professionals, Martinez points to social media as one of the primary tools of trade used to build the Buffalo Spot’s success. The Buffalo Spot has amassed more than 25,000 followers on Instagram, which

Martinez credits to the company’s focus on the customer experience through social media.

“We have a really creative team here, we’re young millennials managing a business as executives. We’re very progressive – our owner, he’s [only] 36 years old – we all kind of agree on using social media and online ordering, and we’ve been able to adapt since March, just using social media to increase our online ordering.”

The pandemic has created panic in the restaurant industry, considering the opening and closure of indoor and outdoor dining through the majority of the year.

In Irvine, the Buffalo Spot, which is located near UC Irvine, has struggled considering its proximity to the campus. When the pandemic began, one of the biggest challenges to overcome was losing the physical traffic from UC Irvine after the campus was closed.

Arash Veysi, owner of the Buffalo Spot’s Irvine location, explained how his location essentially became detrimental to their success.

“Where we are located is more of an issue. When COVID-19 hit, we lost all the UC Irvine students, our biggest audience, as we are right in front of the university. We are isolated to the south of Irvine, and not many companies or residential areas are around us,” he explained in an email with *Irvine Weekly*.

Veysi, who operates the Irvine location with his wife Sachley, has lived in Irvine for 15 years, and explained that it was essential to adapt. However, thanks to the help of the Buffalo Spot’s top-down leadership model, the Buffalo Spot’s



Irvine location has been doing well.

“We quickly added delivery systems (UberEATS, DoorDash, Grubhub and the Buffalo Spot Online Ordering) to our restaurant to reach a different part of Irvine. We have deployed safety measures to protect our employees and customers,” he wrote. “We are optimistic that when the vaccine is deployed, we will be welcoming back UCI students.”

Martinez added that the Buffalo Spot has been able to adapt to new COVID-19 protocols, while still having the ability to shift focus onto the customer experience, a trait that he believes is the result of having a young, adaptive team.

As a result of this attention to detail focused on the customer experience, the Buffalo Spot has created viral food moments on TikTok and Instagram by using the power of food influencers, along with new, intuitive ideas.

In August, the Buffalo Spot introduced the Boss Fries (\$29.99), a pizza-box divided into four quadrants, loaded with the Buffalo Spot’s signature buffalo fries – but served family style. Martinez added that the Boss Fries have become

the company’s most successful limited time offer to date.

“We were just goofing around. We said, ‘Let’s get a pizza box and put like a bunch of fries in it and put the chicken on top,’ and when we came out with that it went viral – over 2 million views,” he said. “We sold 70 Boss Fries the first week with no advertisement, and the second week, once it went viral, we sold over 1,000 in California.”

Looking into next year, Martinez hinted at a Boss Fries 2.0 for the upcoming Super Bowl, along with some new flavor concepts, including Flamin’ Hot Cheetos. He added that finding creative energy to continue enhancing the customer experience was the most challenging aspect.

“I think the creativity part of it, and being able to stay ahead of the game, was the most difficult thing, so we were just constantly bringing up ideas,” he said. “One thing that we saw was that everybody was pulling out their money for marketing for a lot of restaurants. We took that plunge. We decided to double up, because we thought those who invest now are really going to succeed.”





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Photo by Orange County Great Park

FARMERS TO FLYERS

A LOOK BACK AT THE HISTORY OF THE O.C. AND OF MCAS EL TORO.

BY LIZ GOLDNER

Since its 2011 opening, Irvine's Great Park Gallery has presented a variety of provocative exhibitions, many of them aviation related, with others exploring various aspects of contemporary art.

While the gallery is now closed, a look back at its 2012 aviation related show, "Farmers to Flyers: Marine Corps Air Station El Toro and Mid-Century Orange County," reveals the gallery's devotion to intensive research, to historical accuracy and to alluring presentation of its art pieces and supporting memorabilia. Displayed from September 2012 to

March 2013, "Farmers to Flyers" was comprised of historical photos, videos, oral histories, documents and artifacts, detailing MCAS El Toro's impact on Southern California. It was curated by Henry Korn, formerly Manager, Arts, Culture and Heritage at the Great Park.

I visited this exhibition shortly after it opened and was fascinated by its extensive presentation, documenting the history of Orange County and of MCAS El Toro. I wrote a review of the show for a publication that has morphed into another entity. The information contained within my review brings to light how

relevant and important our county's history continues to be. Here is my review.

"Farmers to Flyers: Marine Corps Air Station El Toro and Mid-Century Orange County" tells the story, in pictures, words, video and sculpture, of how the O.C. grew in a century and a half from vegetable fields and citrus orchards to a Marine air base, and ultimately to a bursting-at-the-seams megalopolis. This exhibition was created in part from 400 interviews with El Toro veterans, conducted by the Center for Oral and Public History at Cal State Fullerton. This show's initial display documents in

photographs and words the agrarian nature of Orange County of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Here are descriptions of the massive Irvine Ranch and of three members of the Irvine family who ran that successful empire. Also profiled is Japanese-American Roy Sakioka who settled and farmed in Orange County, was later interned at Manzanar Internment Camp, and then returned to his farm, eventually moving on to working as a successful real estate developer. Here are displays about the proliferation of citrus crops and their scenic fruit box logos, each a work of art itself.

The core of this exhibition is the development of MCAS El Toro (carved out of land originally owned by the pioneer farmers). Along with the requisite accounts of military training and paraphernalia are portrayals of life on this base, as this city within a city was occupied by hundreds of thousands of marines and their families over decades. These depictions include visuals and stories about the schools, playgrounds, churches, dances, performances, sports teams, beach outings and shopping at the base "shopping mall" for military gear, pots and pans, women's and children's clothing and more. Particularly informative are panels about female Marines, handsome in their uniforms, working on aircraft and engaging in team sports. There are also written accounts by Marines from disparate parts of the country about the bucolic base, the perfect weather, the orange scented air and the nearby farmland.

The exhibition explains that Orange County's massive expansion, starting in the 1960s and continuing to the present day, occurred partly due to many of the service people who resided at El Toro, who loved the area and eventually settled here. Adding to this human influence was the considerable amount of land developed into tract housing, business and shopping centers all over the county, and the construction of a major university and one famous amusement park. Here is a picture of President Johnson at a University of California, Irvine



Photo by Orange County Great Park

dedication in 1964; another of a family moving into the first Mission Viejo Company home in 1967; one of Disneyland being constructed in the 1950s; and a shot of OC native President Richard Nixon landing at El Toro Marine Base during the Vietnam War. To this exhibition's credit, a few panels are devoted to the emergence here of the ultra-right wing John Birch Society.

The final portion of this show is about the closing of MCAS El Toro in the

1990s, about its proposed changeover to an airport, the ensuing battle with residents about its fate, and the citizens' vote to turn the base into a park in 2002. Implicit in this final display is that it is to Orange County's credit that this Great Park is even being built – in a region that a decade ago seemed lost to the ravages of over-development.

This pastoral area now features acres of indigenous trees and vegetation, sports fields and an arts complex, all sur-

rounded by an extraordinary amount of undeveloped space, much of that space slated to become the park.

Great Park Gallery, Palm Court Art Complex, Orange County Great Park, Irvine.

cityofirvine.org/orange-county-great-park/arts-exhibitions

The Great Park Gallery and Hangar 244 continue to be closed to the public at large until further notice, and an opening date has not been determined.



Photo by Orange County Great Park



Photo by Orange County Great Park

MUSIC

SUMEAU WRESTLES WITH TOUGH TIMES

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

Married couple Kat Primeau and Chris Sousa started dream-pop band Sumeau as a duo, just the two of them creating beautiful music together. But they're popular people, and it wasn't long before their friends started joining the Sumeau ranks en masse. The 2014 self-titled debut album was a lot of fun, and here we are in a turbulent (to say the least) 2020 and Sumeau is a nine-piece.

"The band emerged out of Chris and I meeting at EastWest studios in Hollywood," says Primeau. "We were both working there, and when there weren't rockstar clients in the building we would use the rooms and all the fun chambers, the great microphones. Record joke songs and then eventually it turned into writing 'real songs.' We created our first album from there."

The pair toured as a duo with a Boss RC-30 loop pedal filling out the sound.

"When we came back a bunch of friends came to our show and said they'd join the band," Primeau says. "That's how we grew into the amorphous nine-piece plus band."

There are plenty of bands out there with a lot of members, but not many of them started life as a touring duo. You can't, for example, imagine Slipknot going on stage like that – just two masks and a pedal.

"The Polyphonic Spree has a good aesthetic," says Primeau "We love having a wall of people to go with the wall of sound."

Obviously that swell in membership will have resulted in an organic evolution of a sound that Sousa says was always dreamy and lush, right from the start.

"But then adding additional members to help us record the album made it so we could write and arrange for more people," he says. "Initially we just made music that required more people to play it than we had, and once we had more members it made more sense to have music that sounded like that. We were able to, on the newer record with the help of our band, really capture the



Photo by Eric Peterson

sounds we were looking for initially."

It's all climaxed with the *This is Not a Dream* album which will have dropped by the time this piece is out, and Primeau says that she's blown away with how it turned out.

"You always have the best wishes for your project, but the way that the recording went down, how blissful and joyful that experience was and then really fine tuning everything, I couldn't be happier with the dreamy, less happy sound," she says. "I feel like it's coming out at a good time too, when people need it. A sonic balm and melodic mantras to get through the rest of this year. We're very proud of our little music baby here, and everybody's put a lot of time and effort into paying attention to the details. Hopefully it pans out and it's a bit more cohesive and wholesome than the initial album that we did in 2014."

While the songs were written before COVID changed the world, Primeau says that the themes are totally relevant today.

"*This is Not a Dream* alludes to the surrealist idea of the treachery of images," she says. "We can exist in this dream-like state where we can awaken to reality, and that's what I think this year is calling for. When we awaken, we want to be pure love and we want to share beauty and light. That's the inspiration and mission I would say."

It may have preceded coronavirus but Primeau was losing her father to early onset dementia during the writing and recording process, so the pair worked through some very dark days. When lockdown kicked in, having a project to work on kept the couple sane.

"It's great because we were already working on it and then, things slowing down a bit, it took us a while to com-

plete the album because albums take a while," says Sousa. "But because of having lockdown and having more time, it definitely gave us the inspiration and time to finish this album and then we got back to work immediately and began working on a new album. So we've been working on that process kind of at the same time."

Another album in the works, already? Wow. Meanwhile, they've been working on "g" listening kits, jars of glitter to send out with the new album.

"That has been soothing and so fun," says Primeau. "We're both makers, so we always want to be making something. This has given us purpose, and it also feels like we're giving a gift."

There's a new single too – "Samsara" – which they say is about death and rebirth.

"It's about trying to break free from the cycle of death and rebirth," says Primeau. "Having an awareness of death, as a way of living and giving great insight to being a better person and bringing more to this moment. Not feel like a victim to circumstances but really emerge and purposefully use this moment where this is this recognition of change needed – let's fucking do it."

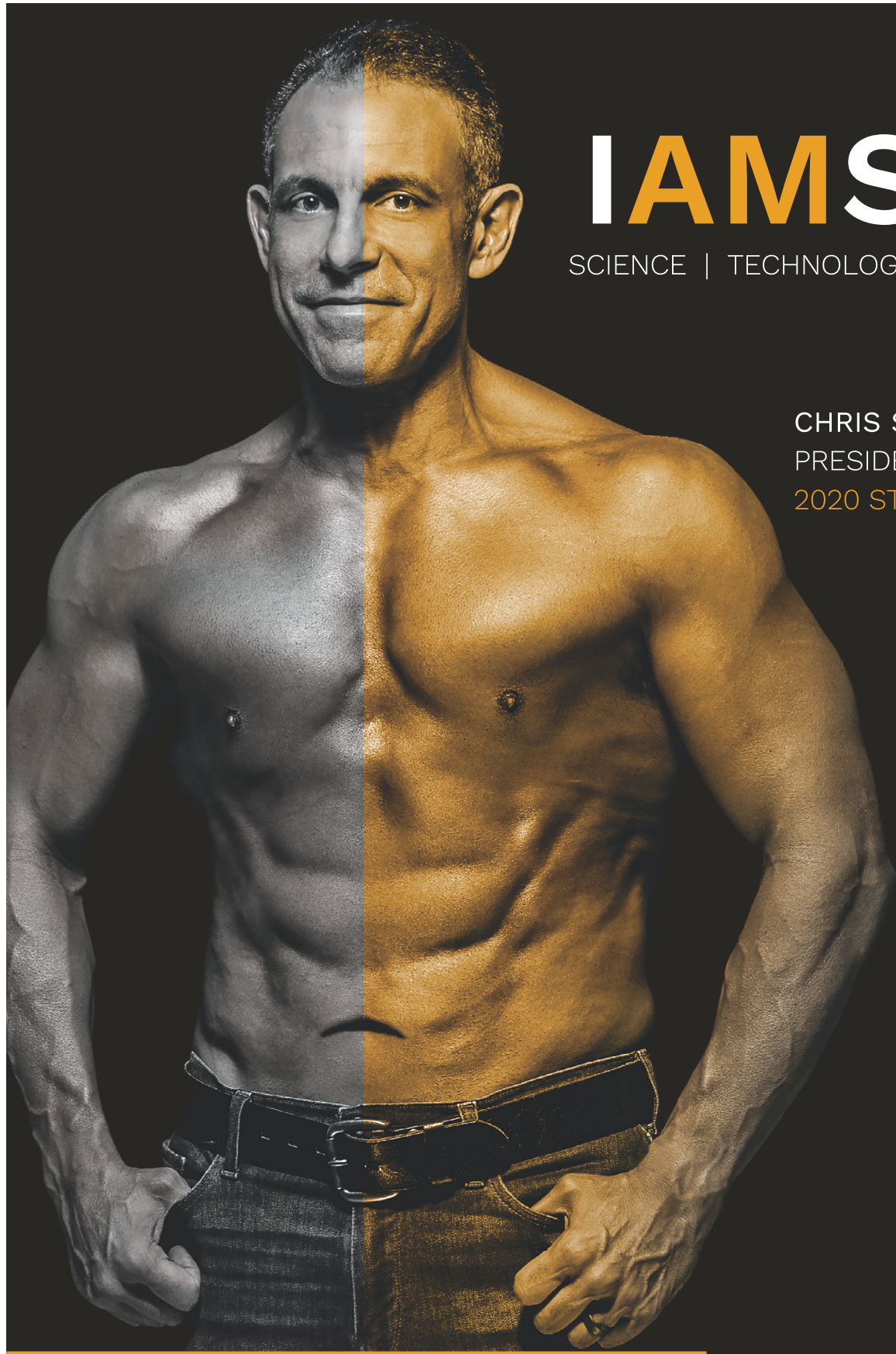
Then there's that name, which sounds like it might be an expansion of those spiritual themes. Rather, there's a far more simple, and fun, explanation.

"It's a combination of my last name and Kat's last name," says Sousa. "The word 'sumo' sounds good and I liked it. Even before I knew Kat, I thought that would make a cool band name. Weirdly we started working on music together and I was like, 'Wait a minute, this works perfect.' Also, I liked the idea that it was this small thing but then it got massive with adding members and making bigger sounds. I liked the force of a lot of something, and you get that image from thinking of the sumo sport."

That's exactly what Sumeau is – a giant force. Sadly, we don't get to experience them live right now, at least not fully. But we all hope that will change soon.

"The fact that that's not happening has been not great but at the same time I have a feeling that once we get back to it, it will be in full force and everyone will be really excited," says Sousa in conclusion. "Maybe people who have been taking for granted musical live performance for a while and are not getting out there as much will maybe be more inspired to check it out."

Sumeau's *This is Not a Dream* album is out now.



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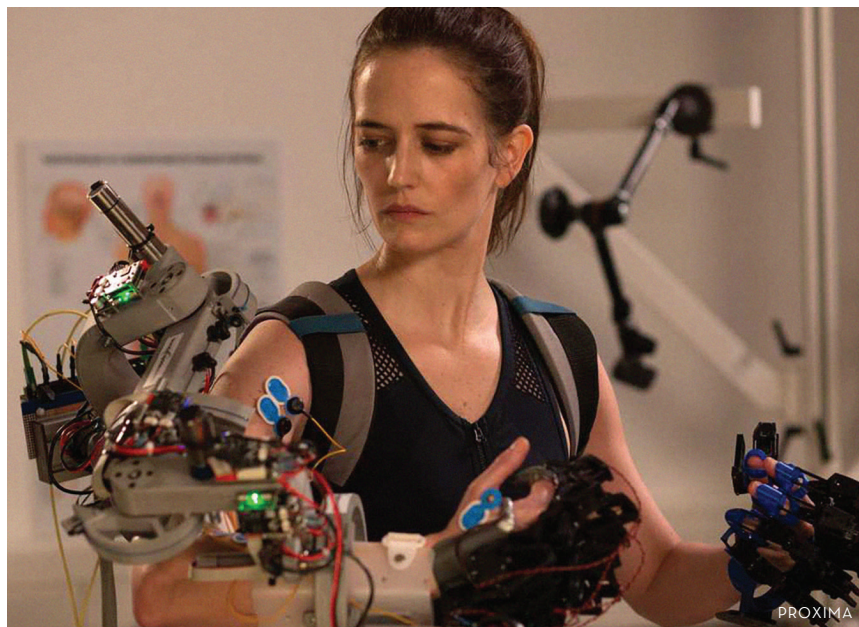
IRVINE WEEKLY MOVIE GUIDE

JINGLE-JANGLE, CHICK FIGHT, RUN, PROXIMA AND MORE.

BY IRVINE WEEKLY CRITICS

Irvine Weekly's Movie Guide is your look at the hottest films available on your TV sets, electronic devices and in select drive-ins throughout Southern California. As always, our film critics let you know what's worth the watchtime and what's not – from indie art house gems to popcorn-perfect blockbusters to new movies garnering buzz – indicating where you can catch them whether it be digital Video on Demand (VOD) or streaming subscription services. Here are some of the biggest titles that came out in recent weeks as reviewed by Chuck Wilson, Asher Luberto and Lina Lecaro.

PROXIMA /VOD



When French astronaut Sarah Loreau (Eva Green) arrives in Russia to join the next crew of the International Space Station, it doesn't take long for her American commander (Matt Dillon) to accuse her of being a "space tourist." She's a woman, after all, and a mother of an eight-year-old to boot, and surely a

woman can't handle both motherhood and the rigors of space science.

Sarah, who reads books and watches movies from an upside down position to prepare herself for the inverted gravity of space, is confident of her skills, but is worried that her daughter, Stella (Zélie Boulant-Lemesle) won't be able to handle her mom being in space for a year. The two are inseparable, and the closer Sarah gets to launch day, the more agitated mother and daughter become.

This is the finest work of Green's career but she's matched by young Boulant-Lemesle, whose laser gaze surely forced Green to dig deeper, much as a questing child will cause an observant mother to

surprise herself. The acting duo's power is such that they manage to rescue the film from a third act plot turn that finds Sarah running off on a mom-errand the night before launch that's almost too absurd to bear. If she had just asked, Stella would have told her mom to chill and focus on the mission. (Chuck Wilson)

HILLBILLY ELEGY / NETFLIX

Set in Middletown, Ohio, Ron Howard's *Hillbilly Elegy* is the kind of film you expect *Saturday Night Live* to spoof in a weekly sketch. This adaptation of J.D. Vance's memoir means well, but Howard's clichéd approach to filmmaking makes it hilarious for all the wrong reasons.

The film is OSCAR BAIT in all caps: it has star actors, lots of makeup and tons of ugly crying. It jumps back and forth between the late 1990's and 2011, when the now-grown J.D. (Gabriel Basso) is called back to Ohio from New Haven, Conn., where he lives with his sexy and sophisticated girlfriend (Freida Pinto), applying for summer internships at big-city law firms. His mother, it seems, has had a heroine overdose. That O.D. is one of many melodramatic turns taken by Vanessa Taylor's screenplay, which lurches from one tragedy to another. There is no subtlety in this portrayal of rust belt America, which relies on exaggerated stereotypes to get its point across. Every side character is either a drug addict or fallen woman. Amy Adams, as J.D.'s mother, is both. Glenn Close, bless her heart, is meme-worthy as Grandma Vance. In one scene, she tells J.D. that, "the Polish bury their dead with their asses sticking up, that way they can park bikes in them." It's not supposed to be funny, but it is. (Asher Luberto)

DANCE DREAMS: THE HOT CHOCOLATE NUTCRACKER / NETFLIX



When Debbie Allen told performing arts students if they wanted fame, it would cost in sweat, she wasn't kidding. That iconic role in *Fame* has become her life's work via her LA-based Dance Academy (known as DADA). The new Shondaland doc *Dance Dreams: Hot Chocolate Nutcracker*, offers a brief chronicle of Allen's award-winning career, but the focus here is her school's annual ballet showcase, a giddy and

soulful take on *The Nutcracker* that marks the start of the holiday season every year. Directed by Oliver Bolkenberg, the documentary shows how Allen, her staff and a slew of hopeful dancers go through the audition process then prepare and rehearse for the local dance tradition.

For the past 20 years, DADA has worked to open up the opportunity for expression and movement that dance provides, providing opportunities for youth of color and helping to inspire talent from all walks of life regardless of financial status. Which makes the personal stories by Allen's students the most inspiring aspect here. The dance world has not been particularly inclusive in terms of body types and backgrounds, and most academies are not cheap, so it takes real dedication to excel. Many Hot Chocolate performers have gone on to have successful careers as dancers, but as the film reminds us, learning the kind of discipline and teamwork that dance can provide is valuable no matter what field these young people chose to pursue. (Lina Lecaro)

JINGLE JANGLE / NETFLIX

While holiday spirit made the Grinch's heart shrink, *Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey* will expand the soul of most viewers. Those who take an interest in this Christmas musical will be charmed by its grand production and good intentions, particularly in its message about the merits of friendship.

Once upon a time, a brilliant inventor and toymaker named Jeronicus Jangles made a discovery, bringing a tin toy – a matador named Don Juan Diego – to life. Jeronicus plans to mass produce the toy, but his apprentice, Gustafson (Keegan Michael-Key), steals his prized creation, along with a host of other one-of-a-kind contraptions. Thirty years later, Jeronicus (now played by Forest Whitaker) is out of ideas. It isn't until he meets his granddaughter, Journey (Madelen Mills), that he finds the strength to work again. There's a lot more in the mix, from a Christmas Day deadline to Gustafson's plan to steal Jeronicus' latest invention, *Buddy 3000*. But Talbert keeps things moving swiftly, elegantly and most excitingly as he punctuates the action with musical numbers written by Philip Lawrence, Davy Nathan and Michael Diskint, choreographed by Ashley Wallen.

The songs alone make *Jingle Jangle* worth a watch. Like the best Christmas

JINGLE JANGLE



stories, it will be passed down from generation to generation, whether on Netflix or DVD, as something to help families get into the holiday spirit. It's simply spectacular. (Asher Luberto)

RECON / VOD

Beautifully written novels don't always translate to the silver screen. A filmmaker can faithfully tell the book's story but still miss the mark because a good novel's power so often lies in the writer's use of language. For *Recon*, writer-director Robert Port is admirably faithful to the plot and dialogue of *Peace*, a classic short 2008 novel by Richard Bausch, but the filmmaker struggles to find a visual equivalent for the "sick to his soul" introspection of the book's main character.

Alexander Ludwig is Corporal Marson, the reluctant leader of a four man unit following an old man (Franco Nero) they don't quite trust up an Italian mountainside in the closing days of World War II. They're scouting Germans but the American soldiers are preoccupied by the memory of a local prostitute their commander murdered by the side of the road. Should they report him? Was it a crime or just war as usual? Voiceover and flashbacks make it clear that Marson can't get the girl out of his head but Port stages her death so poorly at the film's start that her presence fails to reverberate over the course of the film.

What does work in *Recon* are the emotionally committed performances of Ludwig, whose character feels far more than he can express, as well as Sam Keeley as Joyner, a brainy bigot an inch away from a nervous breakdown and Chris Brochu as Asch, a charming cynic who covers his fear with non-stop talk.

Recon builds to an internal reckoning for Marson that's frustratingly understaged, but the fullness of feeling the ensemble brings to each scene makes this a misfire with heart. (Chuck Wilson)

JUNGLELAND / VOD

The boxing drama *Jungleland* is one long cliché, but Charlie Hunnam and Jack O'Connell (best known for *Unbroken*), playing brothers named Stanley and Lion, respectively, are so achingly good together – brothers indeed – that you may well forgive the familiarity of it all. Lion is a lightweight boxer and Stanley his manager, but Stanley's shady side deals have derailed Lion's promising career so completely that he's been reduced to bare-knuckle brawling in dingy Massachusetts warehouses.

Sleeping in a condemned building, the brothers are broke and in debt to a loan shark (Jonathan Majors) who agrees to give them a car and cash to make it to a big San Francisco fight a week away. The catch is that must agree to stop in Reno and deliver a frightened young woman named Sky (Jessica Barden) to a famously cruel bad guy (John Cullum). Lion has doubts, but Stanley is insistent.

The trio hit the road, and the shy, mush-mouthed Lion begins to fall for Sky, whose presence sows dissent between the brothers. In the film's best sequence, the travellers hole up Sky's Midwest high school where living room furniture arranged for a play becomes the setting for late-night dancing and conversation. Director Max Winkler has a gift for creating intimacy in cold places, and when not pressing too hard on third act melodrama, gives Hunnam and O'Connell the space to break each other's heart, and ours. (Asher Luberto)

CHICK FIGHT / VOD

Despite the name and premise, *Chick Fight* has zero in common with David Fincher's 1999 classic *Fight Club* and that's not necessarily a bad thing. An earnest attempt at recreating and even seriously nodding to that brutal headtrip of a movie with women would be ridiculous because it was driven by commentary on patently "male" constructs: toxic masculinity, dude on dude one upmanship, etc. What we have here instead is a screwball comedy set in an all-female fight club, which is an interesting idea if the intentions were a little clearer.

Yes there is a lot of punching going on, but it all comes off much too adorable, especially the violence. Blood is minimal and everyone including our heroine Anna (Malin Akerman, who also produced) and her punky nemesis Olivia (Bella Thorne) emerge from their supposedly extreme, anything goes bouts with nary a swollen cheek, just perfectly placed face cuts that somehow only make them look sexier. Female empowerment is referenced here – of course it is – but the film actually feels like it had (very simple) men in mind even more, from the dumb gay jokes to the training sequences featuring Alec Baldwin (always enjoyable, though) as a boozier coming out of retirement to help our girl get her *Rocky/Karate Kid* moment.

It's a silly little movie but for streaming at home it fits the light entertainment bill, especially thanks to comedian Dulcé Sloan as Anna's bestie Charlene, whose one-liners and smart, Black girl magic/badassness is kinda awesome here. We all want a friend who tells it like it is, makes us laugh and has our back, don't we? We also thought it was

nice to see Kevin Connolly again since his *Entourage* days, until we googled what he's been up to and read about sexual assault allegations earlier this year. Sigh. *Girl Fight* will fill up some quarantine TV time just fine but if you want a real feminist fighter story check out watch Hillary Swank in *Million Dollar Baby* or even *The Next Karate Kid*. (Lina Lecaro)

WOLFWALKERS / THEATRICAL, APPLE TV

Directors Tom Moore and Ross Stewart, part of the team behind such animated classics as *The Secret of Kells* and *Song of the Sea*, have outdone themselves with *Wolfwalkers*, a lush fairy tale set in 17th century Ireland. *Wolfwalkers* is animation at a caliber we haven't seen since Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*—magical, mystical, lyrical and profoundly beautiful.

This English-language Irish production doesn't feature quite the cast, budget or visuals of its Japanese counterpart, but it will likely provide a similar sense of wonder. When we first meet Robyn (voiced by Honor Kneafsey), she dreams of being a wolf-hunter just like her father (Sean Bean). But one day, while sneaking out to explore the wooded area beyond the city walls, Robyn discovers that "Wolfwalkers"—human beings who can shape-shift into wolves—are real, and that one of them, Mebh (Eva Whittaker), isn't some beast you shoot with an arrow. She's a little girl, which leads Robyn to take a stand for her newfound friend.

The human world of *Wolfwalkers* is flat and rough, but the forest is where the magic happens. The folkloric score echoes off canopies and streams like a friendly breeze. The wolves move freely,

CHICK FIGHT



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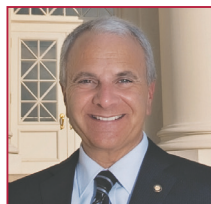
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galloping through a maze of pathways they call home. The directors, who seem to literally breathe fantasy, use watercolor schemes in the forest to contrast with the woodblock animation in town, effectively differentiating the regimented lives of the townies and the magical land of the Wolfwalkers. It's all a feast for the eyes. Miyazaki would be proud. (Asher Luberto)

RUN / HULU

How far will a mother go to keep her child? Lock the doors? Poison the water? Cut off the internet? Each of these scenarios, and more, are carried out by the mother at the center of this sinister, psychological horror-thriller. Played by Sarah Paulson, who has brought her creepy maternal talents to *Ratched*, *American Horror Story* and *12 Years a Slave*, Diane is the mother of a child with an assortment of special needs: Chloe (Kierra Allen) is paralyzed from the waist down, diabetic and asthmatic—everything but a peanut allergy, it would seem. Yet she's a bright girl, eager to start a life of her own as soon the University of Washington sends her an acceptance letter.

One night, after taking a handful of pills, she spots a green/white medication called "trigoxin." As she googles trigoxin, no results appear on screen. Then the lights flicker and the computer shuts off. Mom isn't drugging her, is she? Turns out, she is. Feeding her daughter dog medications and household neurotoxins, Diane starts upping the dosage, detected only through Chloe's odd behavior. This simple but high concept premise of the girl stuck at home only works with a heroine like Chloe and the challenges director Aneesh Chagnity has worked into the story. Chloe can't communicate the details of her experience, whether it be with mom or others, and the torture persists as long as it does because she's not able to get up and leave.

What do you do when you can't walk, you're locked indoors and you have no cellphone? Chagnity's clever, minimalist script doles out enough questions to keep you guessing. He allows the story to take its time without lagging, leaning into the existential fears that plague a mother whose child is ready to

move out. Crisp cinematography by Hillary Spera, taut editing by Nick Johnson and Will Merrick, and quiet sound design create an environment where the creak of a floorboard or the click of a keyboard can set a new scare in motion as the film builds to a whopping, mother-load of a twist. (Asher Luberto)

FREAKY / VOD

This fiendish new take on *Freaky Friday* boasts lead performances that bring to mind Lindsay Lohan and Jaime Lee Curtis in the '90s remake or Rob Schneider and Rachel McAdams in *The Hot Chick*, two comedies that were as seeped in schmaltzy cuteness as they were committed to making us actually buy into the body switcheroo storyline. This one tries pretty hard to be un-cute though, serving up gobs of gore including slit throats, vicious stabbings and head bashings. Kathryn Newton is Millie Kessler, a small town teen who encounters the town serial killer aka the Blissfield Butcher (Vince Vaughn) which -thanks to an ancient mystical dagger- results in a body swap. Alongside pals Nyla (Celeste O'Connor) and Josh (Misha Osherovich), Vaughn as Millie is real and believable, with a youthful urgency that rings true as she sets out to switch back before the curse becomes permanent.

Though the teen comedy elements are quite charming, if a little cliché, this one intends to be a horror film ala *Friday the 13th* too, and there's a hip and homage-y "everyone's-in-on-the-joke" feel from the get-go- when a bunch of drugs and sex having teens share the story of a homecoming dance murderer. The Blumhouse production is all pretty predictable, but like almost every other role he takes, Vaughn is extremely watchable and endearing here- a kiss scene with Millie's crush Booker (Uriah Shelton) is especially awkward and sweet. We actually wanted to see and hear more of the actor as a female teenager. Newton has less to do as the quiet and vicious killer, but she pulls off her moments of menace well too, even post-switch when the film takes a decidedly un-freaky, familiar slasher pic turn. (Lina Lecaro)



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