

Come Together

As the Bay Area reels from the coronavirus pandemic, the Carquinez community has rallied to provide help where it's needed.

BY CASEY CANTRELL // PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIA CECACI

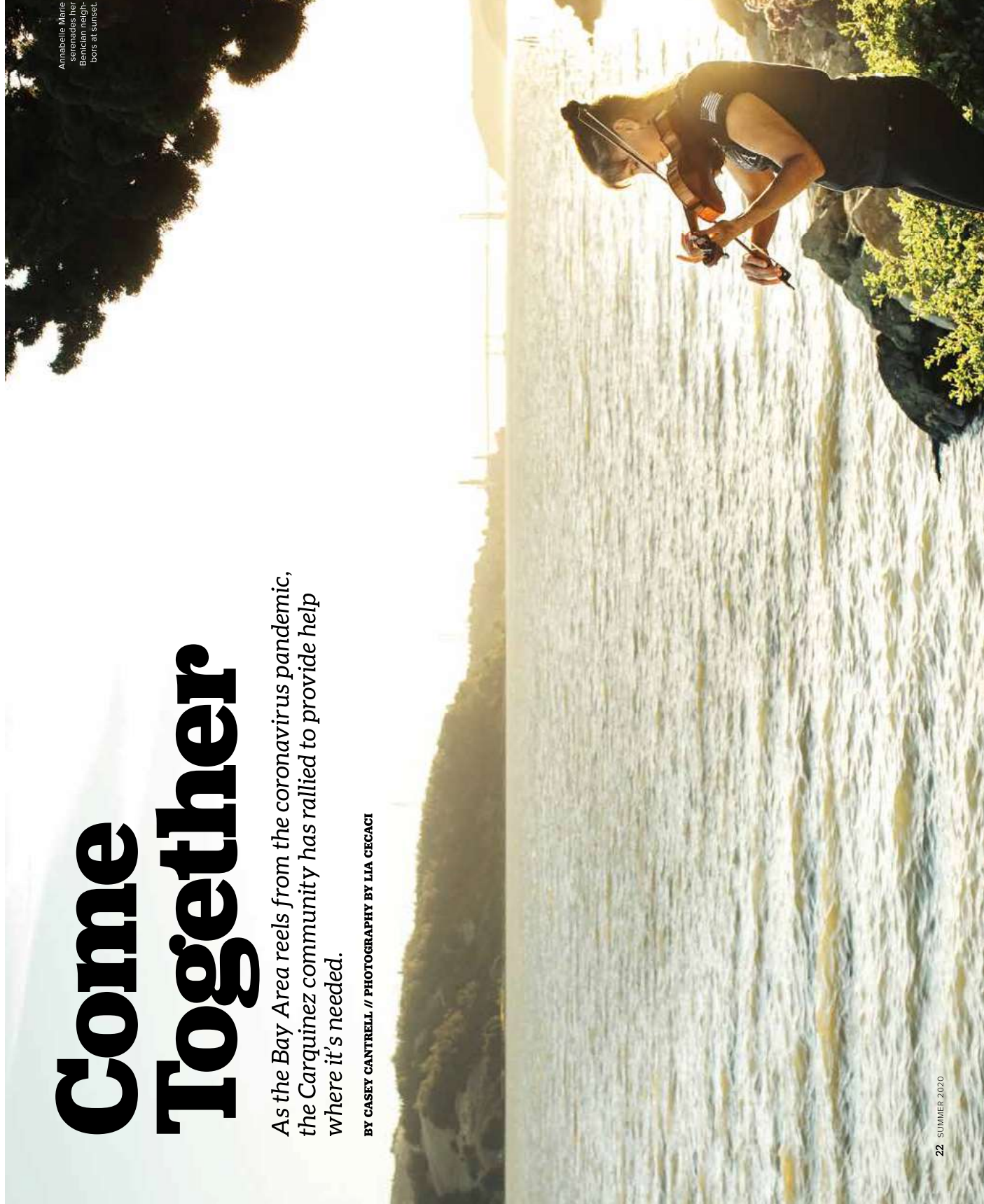
Annabelle Marie serenades her Benician neighbors at sunset.

It is 6 p.m. when Annabelle Marie steps into her backyard on the Benicia waterfront.

As she sets up her amp and tunes her violin, neighbors raise wineglasses in greeting while others gather along the rocky crevices of the shoreline.

After a moment, Marie takes a breath, raises her bow, and plays. The dulcet tones of "Ave Maria" float across the water. Neighbors come out of their homes. Passersby on a distant walkway stop to listen. For a few minutes, the entire city of Benicia seems to fall still, entranced by the music. As Marie fingers the final notes, scattered applause and whoops fill the air.

Every evening for more than three months, the classically trained musician and founder of the world-renowned VOENA Children's Choir has transformed her backyard into a stage, performing from a revolving playlist of 11 songs and giving Benicians a welcome respite from the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.



"People are thirsty for music. They're thirsty for this emotional expression of what they're feeling," says Marie, who has been dubbed "The Violinist by the Water" by residents. "We have a lot of older neighbors who will not miss a night. It lets them know they matter."

Marie's water-side concerts are just one example of the many acts—both big and small—carried out by local artists, business owners, and volunteers to support a region staggered by the global crisis. From virtual paint parties and making masks for medical providers to financial assistance and donating meals to the needy, here's how the Carquinez community has come together to lift each other up.

"People are thirsty for music. They're thirsty for this emotional expression of what they're feeling."

—Anabelle Marie

Change in Plans

Bodil and Larnie Fox were supposed to be enjoying retirement.

When shelter-in-place orders were first announced, the Benician artists and longtime nonprofit professionals were looking forward to holing up with their art projects. About a week later, the couple found themselves in charge of a massive mask-making effort that would consume all of their free time.

"We were thinking we would have plenty of time in our studios," says Larnie. "It was everyone else who was supposed to be working."

The twist of fate came during an early morning walk on March 20, when the couple ran into their neighbor, Marcella Spurgeon, a labor and delivery nurse at Kaiser Permanente Vallejo Medical Center.

"She was upset, because her hospital wasn't providing personal protective equipment," says Larnie.

"One day, you'd go in and get your mask, your hat, your gloves," explains Spurgeon. "The next day you came in, there was nothing."

Bodil, a textile artist, asked if some hand-sewn masks would help. Marcella replied with an enthusiastic yes.

"I was going to make a few masks for my neighbor," says Bodil. "Then I made a few for her colleagues."

As the project continued to grow and grow, Bodil learned that a friend, Ruby Wallis, had created a simple, easy-to-make cloth mask that was large enough to cover an N95 mask. The Foxes then produced a YouTube video providing step-by-step instructions based on Wallis' technique.

But the project took off on March 25 after Benicia Council Member Steve Young promoted the effort on social media. Soon enough, the Foxes were inundated with requests for masks—as well as community members looking to help.

Putting their nonprofit skills to good use, the couple started organizing. On March 31, they had recruited 25 mask makers for the project. By the end of April, that number had ballooned

to more than 50. A month later, the Foxes were overseeing a group of nearly 80 volunteers pushing out thousands of masks. "It grew very organically," says Larnie, adding that he and his wife worked 12-hour days for three weeks before taking a day off on Easter Sunday. "We were in the right place at the right time."

The couple converted their front porch into a drop-off location, supplying volunteers with materials and guidance while collecting masks to distribute to medical workers. As of May 20, the group has donated more than 7,200 masks—plus an assortment of protective gowns, 3D-printed face shields, and other vital equipment—to 60-plus medical facilities.

"I cried," says Spurgeon. "I was so grateful. It humbles me. I've never been so proud to be in my town."

Healthcare workers are not the only beneficiaries of the mask-making effort. Despite several calls from residents to make wearing masks compulsory, the Benicia City Council voted not to require face coverings. In response, Bodil and Larnie gave 500 masks to Young to provide to local businesses. (The City Council later unanimously passed a face mask mandate for indoor and enclosed public spaces.)

"Our policy has been to donate our masks to healthcare workers and their clients," says Bodil. "We hope this donation will prevent the virus from spreading and keep people from ending up in the ICU."



BECOME A MASK MAKER
SUPPORT A GOOD CAUSE AND GIVE BACK TO YOUR LOCAL HEALTH-CARE WORKERS.

Got some extra fabric lying around? Looking for a sewing project to occupy your time?

Contact Bodil Fox at bodilfox@gmail.com to learn how you can help, or watch her mask-making how-to video at youtu.be/UYh6IAKqrao.

PANDEMIC TIMELINE

FEB. 27 The first confirmed case of community spread in the U.S. is reported in Solano County.

MARCH 11 The World Health Organization declares the coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic.

MARCH 17 Contra Costa County announces stay-at-home orders. Solano County would follow suit three days later.

APRIL 28 Gov. Gavin Newsom releases the "Resilience Roadmap" for the gradual reopening of California.

APRIL 30 California tops 500,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19.

MAY 8 Solano County enters Stage 2 of reopening.

MAY 19 Contra Costa County enters Stage 2 of reopening.

MAY 22 California officials approve Solano County's move into Stage 2.5 of reopening.

MAY 27 The U.S. surpasses 100,000 confirmed deaths from COVID-19.

JUNE 15 California passes 150,000 confirmed cases and 5,000 deaths from COVID-19.

Meals on the House

As the coronavirus swept through the Bay Area, small business owners watched as their bottom lines plummeted, with customers staying home and shelter-in-place orders shuttering non-essential businesses. Perhaps no line of business has been more impacted than the restaurant industry, which has seen already thin profit margins disappear into the red.

Opened in 2017, Bar Cava Wine Bar & Eatery quickly became a mainstay of downtown Martinez's burgeoning culinary scene, regularly hosting bustling crowds. But now, the narrow dining room sits empty most days as owner Corey Katz takes orders online and over the phone.

"It's definitely not the same, that's for sure," he says glibly. Katz estimates that the restaurant pulled in \$2,000 each night before the pandemic. By May, that figure had dropped to \$200. He had to fur-loagh his entire staff with the exception of a lone cook. His applications for disaster relief loans seemed to be going nowhere.

Despite his setbacks, the restaurateur didn't stop doing what he does best: serving his community. It started with a \$500 donation from his landlord. After purchasing supplies with the money, Katz took to Facebook with a simple message: *If you've lost your job and need food, text me.*

Almost immediately, Katz received word from dozens of people—single moms, elderly people, families who couldn't afford rent. He also heard back from another group: those looking to help.

"Real estate agents started hitting me up," he says. The agents, along with friends and his landlord, began purchasing Bar Cava gift cards, which they then donated back to Katz to "feed anyone who needs it."

Altogether, Katz has raised more than \$500—including \$2,000 of his own money—to support the region in a number of ways, including providing meals to the homeless and teaming up with Mountain Grounds in Martinez to donate coffee and pastries to Contra Costa Regional Medical Center.

Bar Cava lent the only restaurant helping out: Noonie's Place in Vallejo donated meals to first responders; Vic's in Martinez provided hundreds of free grilled cheese sandwiches to kids; and in Port Costa, Bull Valley Roadhouse raised more than \$42,000 through a GoFundMe campaign for their employees after the restaurant was forced to close.

"If someone's down worse than you, you give them your shirt," says Katz. "If I have \$10 and you have nothing, I'll give you \$5. That's what you do."

For most businesses, the "new normal" means shorter hours, laid-off employees, and fewer customers. At Savage & Cooke, Pinney actually brought in extra staff.

Thirty-five workers, to be exact—all of whom were recently furloughed or laid off from restaurants and bars.

His efforts haven't gone unnoticed. On June 1, state Sen. Bill Dodd named the distillery the Senate District 3 Business of the Year.

"Dave's ingenuity and thoughtfulness has allowed him to produce a potentially lifesaving product while protecting his workers from unemployment," said Dodd in a statement. "This is the very essence of why small businesses are so important to our community ... My hat is off to Dave and his team."

Pinney admits to "a crisis of conscience" that he is thriving at a time when others have lost their jobs and businesses. But a run-in with his general manager, Lauren Blanchard, reminded him of the importance of what he and his team were doing.

"She was getting tired of me," recalls Pinney. "She said to me, 'I've been saving all the thank-you letters you've been getting, and it's in the hundreds already. If you feel bad, you can read them.'"

He got the message loud and clear, he says. "I told myself, 'Just shut up and do your job.'"

Good Business

For some businesses, giving back has led to unexpected success. Inside a red-brick warehouse on Mare Island, workers at Savage & Cooke hustle to keep up with orders. But it's not award-winning bourbon and whiskeys that the distillery's employees are bottling.

In late March, owner Dave Pinney decided to completely halt production on spirits and instead put his resources into making hand sanitizer. By May 15, the distillery had produced more than 100,000 gallons, packaged in 8-ounce, 9-ounce, and gallon containers that are donated or sold through its website.

"I've been busier than ever," says Pinney, who credits local and state officials for tearing down "walls of bureaucracy" in order to make the transition possible. "I'm not even thinking about when things will get back to normal."

For most businesses, the "new normal" means shorter hours, laid-off employees, and fewer customers. At Savage & Cooke, Pinney actually brought in extra staff.

Thirty-five workers, to be exact—all of whom were recently furloughed or laid off from restaurants and bars.

His efforts haven't gone unnoticed. On June 1, state Sen. Bill Dodd named the distillery the Senate District 3 Business of the Year.

"Dave's ingenuity and thoughtfulness has allowed him to produce a potentially lifesaving product while protecting his workers from unemployment," said Dodd in a statement. "This is the very essence of why small businesses are so important to our community ... My hat is off to Dave and his team."

Pinney admits to "a crisis of conscience" that he is thriving at a time when others have lost their jobs and businesses. But a run-in with his general manager, Lauren Blanchard, reminded him of the importance of what he and his team were doing.

"She was getting tired of me," recalls Pinney. "She said to me, 'I've been saving all the thank-you letters you've been getting, and it's in the hundreds already. If you feel bad, you can read them.'"

He got the message loud and clear, he says. "I told myself, 'Just shut up and do your job.'"

Doing Their Part

For decades, the Carquinez Strait's oil refineries have been a steady cornerstone of the community, supplying jobs and financial security to a region accustomed to economic volatility.

That role has been tested during the health crisis, as health restrictions and plunging demand for oil continue to disrupt refinery operations. The most drastic consequence of the slowdown came in late April, when Marathon Petroleum Corporation idled its Martinez refinery and laid off nearly 1,000 contractors. As of June 16, the refinery remains shut down.

But even as production faltered, the refineries threw their financial weight behind the communities that host them.

On March 19, Valero Energy Corporation, which runs a refinery in Benicia, announced that it would commit \$1.8 million through its foundation to communities where the company operates, including \$100,000 to Solano County.

"The health and the safety of our employees, our families, and our communities are critically important," Chairman and CEO Joe Gorder said in a statement. "We are blessed to be able to continue supporting our community partners as we all work together to overcome this extraordinary situation."

One recipient of that support was the Benicia Community Action Council (BCAC), a nonprofit that has provided aid to disadvantaged residents since the 1960s. Among its many programs, the charity provides hot meals to homebound seniors as well as mortgage and rental assistance to low-income residents. Since March, both programs saw dramatic spikes in demand, says

Benicia Community Action Council accepts donations of money, household goods, and food. Visit benicea.com for more information on how you can help.



Savage & Cooke's Dave Pinney

Executive Director Viola Robertson. In April, BCAC spent more than \$67,000 on mortgage and rental assistance alone, more than double its average of \$30,000.

"I was working from seven in the morning to seven at night, seven days a week," says Robertson. "It's never been as bad as this."

Without extra funding, "we would've had to shut down," says Robertson. Luckily, the financial backing from Valero as well as an uptick in community donations saved BCAC from closure—and ensured the nonprofit's clients would keep receiving the help they needed.

"It means a lot to me. It shows me that all of our work is not in vain," says Robertson. And with the renewed support, she offers a promise: "I'm never going to let any seniors go hungry."

The big players are not the only ones helping out: small businesses are doing their part, too.

On March 17, J&D Custom Embroidery in Martinez closed down when Contra Costa County's shelter-in-place order went into effect, but the shop was still receiving orders from its customers. One of those customers, Marc Trapani of Rotator Taproom in Walnut Creek, brought up the idea of doing a fundraiser together.

"He wanted to do something for teachers or healthcare workers," explains co-owner Chris Simoni, who spearheaded the fundraiser. "We looked at a couple of charities, and we landed on [the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano], because we realized the demand was going to be overwhelming for them."

Their intuition proved correct as the nonprofit saw the number of people visiting its distribution sites increase by up to 50 percent in the month after a pandemic was declared.

Simoni tapped into his shop's network of customers as well as his own personal contacts, with J&D giving two free T-shirts to everyone who donated \$100 or more.

A little more than a month later, Simoni and his team had raised more than \$11,000 from 40-plus donors—enough to pay for more than 22,000 meals.

"I'd like to thank [J&D co-owner] Dennis Davis for helping put the fundraiser together," says Simoni, "and obviously a huge thanks to everyone who donated."



Viola Robertson of Benicia Community Action Council



GIVE BACK
SUPPORTING YOUR COMMUNITY IS AS EASY AS HITTING THE DONATE BUTTON.

Benicia Community Action Council accepts donations of money, household goods, and food. Visit benicea.com for more information on how you can help.

A little more than a month later, Simoni and his team had raised more than \$11,000 from 40-plus donors—enough to pay for more than 22,000 meals.

"I'd like to thank [J&D co-owner] Dennis Davis for helping put the fundraiser together," says Simoni, "and obviously a huge thanks to everyone who donated."



The Show Must Go On

of Diego Rivera's *The Flower Vendor* (Girl with Lilies). But even though he's sheltered at home, the artist and cofounder of El Comalito Collective is far from alone. Online, nearly 2,000 people follow along as Camacho-Gonzalez cheerfully provides instructions in English and Spanish over Facebook Live. For months, the region's vibrant art scene has operated in isolation—an often painful experience for those used to sharing their artwork with each other and the community. Nevertheless, artists and gallery owners alike have worked hard to stay connected and to showcase new pieces inspired by the ongoing crisis.

For Camacho-Gonzalez and his husband, Abel Rodríguez, that means opening up their Vallejo home for free virtual paint parties every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to help people take a break from their pandemic-induced anxieties—a decision they call “an act of resistance.”

“Art is essential. It allows folks to practice self-care,” says Rodríguez. “You can choose to engage in the negative discourse, the racism, the anti-Asian sentiments. Or you can choose to take care of yourself.”

“When you make art accessible to the community, [that’s] empowerment,” says Camacho-Gonzalez. “They can take these skills and continue that self-care.”

In Benicia, VOENA is finding new ways to help young performers stay connected. The pandemic has affected artists of every stripe, and the lauded children’s choir was no exception. Heading into spring, Marie and her students were gearing up for what promised to be a busy concert season when all their plans were upended.

“I panicked a bit,” says Marie. “We’re a performance-based choir. I didn’t want to face the truth at first that all our concerns might be canceled.” But as the health crisis became impossible to ignore, Marie grew resolute. “All I thought was, what could I do so that these kids don’t feel abandoned?” she says. She began coordinating with her students to produce “virtual choirs”—a series of slickly edited YouTube videos pieced together from recordings submitted by members

of the choir. In one video—a cover of the Beatles’ “All You Need Is Love”—the performers sing at home, their voices coming together as their images rearrange into a heart.

The online performances provide her students a sense of normalcy, says Marie. “It helped them realize they’re not alone,” she says. “The first thing they always say to me is, ‘It’s so good to see our friends again.’”

“This year, the traditional marks of summer, like music festivals, sporting events, and holiday parades will be conspicuously absent. Restaurants will continue to operate with social-distancing guidelines; stores will see fewer customers; downtown crowds will be sparse. Cities, hospitals, and schools will anxiously prepare for the fall—and a possible resurgence of the coronavirus.

What comes next remains unknown. But one thing is clear—the business owners, creators, and philanthropists who make up the character of the region will continue to adapt and support their community.

“Our gallery is a community and cultural space,” says Rodríguez. “We thrive when our community is in need.” “It’s all about gratitude,” says Bodil. “It’s a community coming together.”

And for all the uncertainty that the region faces, there is no doubt that the community will persevere.

“We’re family,” says Katz. “Lean on me, and I’ll lean on you. We’ll get through this together.”

Mention this add for 5% off moving services!

watersmoving.com

WATERS

WATERS MOVING & STORAGE

MOVING YOU ON TO BETTER THINGS



Family owned and operated moving company in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1975. With a long standing tradition of building trust and respect with all our clients.

Over 85% of our business is repeat/referral business!

Safe and Secure Storage available for short and long term storage.

We offer packing, moving, storage and disposal services.

Ask about our tote boxes for your local move.

Residential & Commercial Moving
Local, Long Distance and International

Waters Moving believes it’s everyone’s duty to practices individual responsibility in these unusual times. **Our crews and sales team wear masks and gloves as directed by the CDC.**

Call Today! 1-800-232-9977 • 1-925-372-0914
37 Bridgehead Rd., Martinez

SKINCARE ESSENTIALS

HYDRATE AND RESTORE FOR A HEALTHY COMPLEXION

RODAN + FIELDS

No matter your age, gender, skin tone or ethnicity, Rodan + Fields® products can help you to achieve healthier, younger-looking skin.

CONTACT ME TODAY FOR A FREE CONSULTATION



CARMILLA DENNO
R+F Independent Consultant
707.373.0334
carmilladenno131@gmail.com

carmilladenno.myrafnf.com

Carquinez

ADVERTISE

Let customers know how you’re continuing to serve them through this difficult time. Our magazine is positive, uplifting, and engaging. It’s the perfect source of information for readers throughout the Carquinez region, including the towns of Benicia, Crockett, Martinez, Port Costa, and Vallejo. Our rates are structured to allow businesses of every size and budget to partner with us.

For rates, distribution, and other advertising information, contact Deanne O’Connor at deanne@carquinezmagazine.com or call/text (510) 823-0509.

carquinezmagazine.com | [carquinezmagazine](https://www.facebook.com/carquinezmagazine) | [carquinezmagazine](https://www.instagram.com/carquinezmagazine)