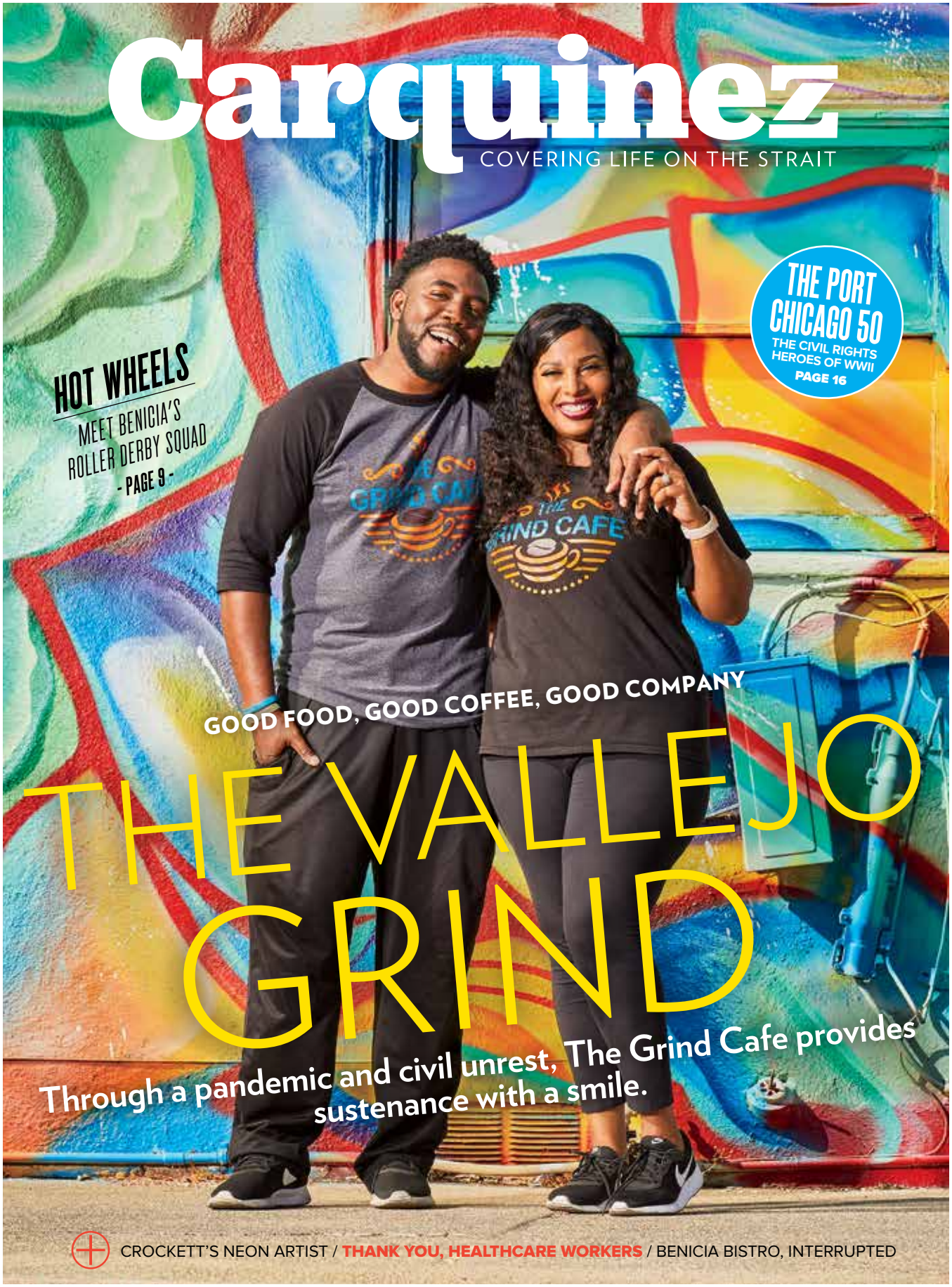
Carquinez

COVERING LIFE ON THE STRAIT



THE PORT CHICAGO 50
THE CIVIL RIGHTS HEROES OF WWII
PAGE 16

HOT WHEELS
MEET BENICIA'S ROLLER DERBY SQUAD
- PAGE 9 -

GOOD FOOD, GOOD COFFEE, GOOD COMPANY

THE VALLEJO GRIND

Through a pandemic and civil unrest, The Grind Cafe provides sustenance with a smile.

CROCKETT'S NEON ARTIST / **THANK YOU, HEALTHCARE WORKERS** / BENICIA BISTRO, INTERRUPTED

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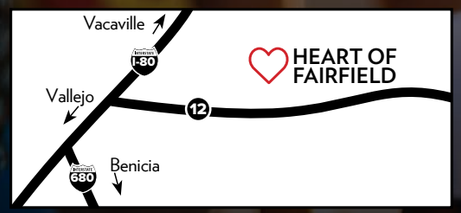

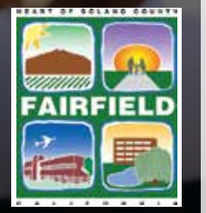

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DINE OUT DOWNTOWN
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Vallejo Sunset
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Martinez Waterfront
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Make sure you're registered to vote!

CARQUINEZ REGION
VOTING GUIDE
LOCAL CANDIDATE INFO FOR CONTRA COSTA AND SOLANO COUNTIES

VOTING GUIDE INFO

THE GENERAL ELECTION ON NOVEMBER 3 IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER. ARE YOU READY?
Do you know who's running in your area? Our handy voting guide breaks down local races, plus information on how you can vote. **Download the guide at carquinezmagazine.com/voting-guide.**

Carquinez fall 2020

ON OUR COVER
Owners Marco and Tiffany McCleod in front of a Vallejo mural just around the corner from The Grind Cafe.
PAGE 33

Cover photography by Rob Williamson

Black Navy sailors load munitions at Port Chicago.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: VALLEJO NAVAL AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM; CALI GODLEY; LIA CECACI

The Port Chicago 50

FACING DEADLY CONDITIONS AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, A GROUP OF NAVY SAILORS STOOD THEIR GROUND. **PAGE 16**

Arthur Metu of Capital City Pharmacy

SO MANY HELPING HANDS PAGE 14 & 27

Little Pharma: Arthur Metu of Capital City Pharmacy in Vallejo provides a personal touch to your prescriptions. **PAGE 14**

Jolayne Haines, RN

HEALTHCARE HEROES

Since March, medical professionals of every stripe have worked tirelessly to protect us from the pandemic. Here are a few of their inspiring stories. **PAGE 27**

strait side

» Meet the badass women behind Solano County's first women's and gender-expansive roller derby league.

PLUS: Get lit with neon artist Bill Concannon; talking politics with Vessels of Vallejo founder Louis Michael. **PAGE 9**

spotlight

» They moved from Italy to Benicia to start a restaurant—but then the pandemic derailed their dreams. **PAGE 36**

sip & savor

» Work is never a grind at The Grind Cafe. Meet the owners of Vallejo's popular Black-owned cafe.

PLUS: Feast on classic New York–style pizzas and Philly cheesesteaks at Slice of Italeigh in Martinez. **PAGE 33**

Carquinez

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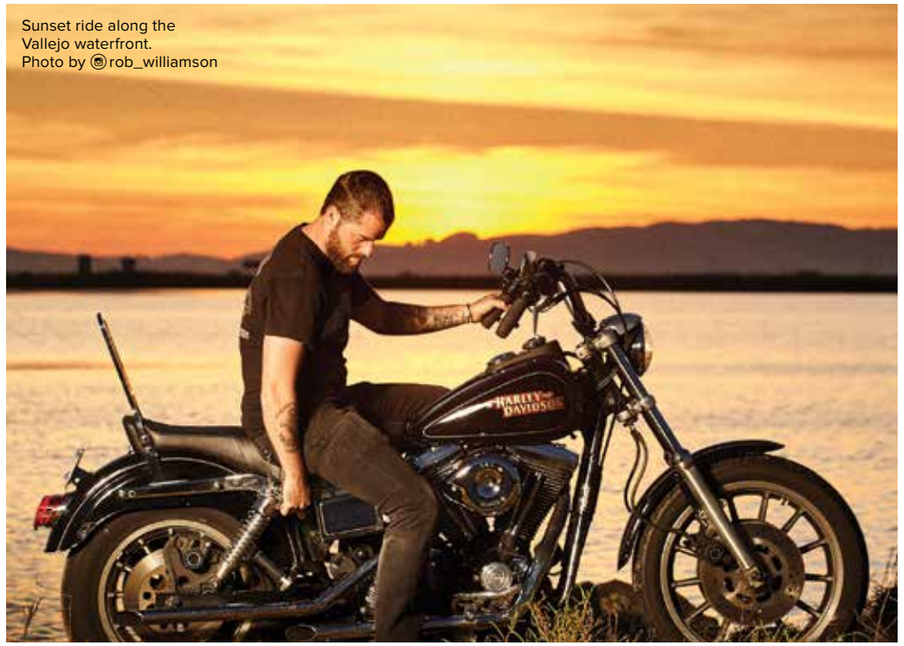


Sunset ride along the Vallejo waterfront.
Photo by ⓘrob_williamson

From Crisis Comes Opportunity

ALAN NIKU

It's been a hell of a year, hasn't it?

As we head into fall, one thing is certain—this holiday season will be unlike any we've experienced before. Will we be able to gather with family and friends? How do we celebrate during a time of crisis?

I'd be lying if I said I had the answers. But as I reflect on the first year of *Carquinez*, I find solace in the very thing we promised to provide you in our inaugural issue—stories. In uncertain times, it's stories that keep us grounded. They're a reminder of where we've come from and where we're going.

In this issue, we cover more of the stories that define this region. That includes stories of the present—the healthcare workers who have diligently served their community throughout the pandemic; the Vallejo cafe and Martinez pizzeria that have found success in spite of one obstacle after another; the Crockett resident who spins light into dazzling artwork. That includes stories from the past—the Port Chicago 50, who protested racism in the U.S. Navy and changed the course of American history. And that includes stories of the future—the young Vallejo activist speaking truth to power and the passionate Benician women behind Solano County's first roller derby league.

Here's to the stories that kept us afloat during 2020, and here's to those who, in the middle of everything falling apart, nevertheless persisted.

Best regards,

Casey Cantrell
Executive Editor, Carquinez

@carquinezmagazine
Go online for more! **carquinezmagazine.com**

A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

I'm out in the community several times a week along with our amazing advertising director, Scott Slocum. We talk to business owners every day, and the one thing we all seem to have in common is a feeling of dogged (and dog-tired) determination to keep going—and to help others keep going, too. The question I am asked most often is, "How can we help?"

I've been encouraged by witnessing the perseverance and the resourcefulness of business owners forced to make do in order to make ends meet. I've been inspired by the lovely, creative patio spaces recently put in place at restaurants such as **The Rellik Tavern** in Benicia and **Bull Valley Roadhouse** in Port Costa (give them a try!).

And I've been able to feel connected to our communities through—what else?—social media. I discovered our cover photographer, Rob Williamson, on Instagram when I saw this sunset image of his (top left)!

Sincerely,

Deanne O'Connor
Owner, Publisher, and Creative Director,
Carquinez

Co-owner Marco McCleod of The Grind Cafe in Vallejo

ROB WILLIAMSON has been living and photographing in the Bay Area for the past 15 years. He thinks nothing is better than when the lights go down in the city and the sun shines on the Bay (and Harley-Davidson motorcycles).

Rob shot the cover image of Tiffany and Marco McCleod of The Grind Cafe in Vallejo (story on page 33) and the Carquinez Quad Squad on page 9. See more of his work at **robistall.com** or **rob_williamson.**

LAUREN BONNEY is a Bay Area writer and editor specializing in lifestyle, travel, culture, fitness, and food and drink. She has a soft spot for cheese and a great cup of coffee. Follow her gastronomic discoveries at **bonneyeatsworld.**

LIA CECACI lives in Martinez with her husband and two dogs. They run a leather goods business in downtown. Lia has been behind a camera professionally since 2008. You can see more of her work at **oh-honestly.com.**

TRINA ENRIQUEZ relishes the joie de vivre inherent in lifestyle, art, and travel magazines, which she has written for and edited over the past 15 years. She is constantly dreaming of her next trip abroad but loves to "make every day an adventure" by trying new things at home, too.

SARAHBETH MANEY is a photojournalist born and raised in Martinez. Her work can be seen in *The New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle,* and *The Guardian*. She enjoys traveling, reading, and cat-watching. **sbmaneyphoto.com** or follow her at **sbmaneyphoto.**

MEGAN MCCREA is a San Francisco–based journalist. Her work has appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle, Sunset, Via,* and *Mabuhay*. She co-authored Other Places Publishing's guidebook to the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Palau. **meganmccrea.com**

CAITLIN MCCULLOCH is a longtime editor who now enjoys the freelance life. Her interests include fashion, the 49ers, playing with her dachshund puppy, and a good glass of wine. Caitlin was born and raised in Benicia. Visits back to the waterside town are a frequent occurrence.

BOB SCHNELL is a recent transplant to Marin County. He provides headshots, portraits, and brand photography. In his free time, he enjoys exploring the natural beauty of Northern California with his fiancee. See his work at **certaingravityphoto.com** and **certaingravityphoto.**

CAREY SWEET has spent almost three decades writing about food, travel, and restaurants for publications including the *San Francisco Chronicle, The Press Democrat,* and *USA Today.* She has won national food-writing awards and provides coverage for the Michelin Guide.

strait side

MOTLEY CREW
Front row, left to right: Hittsburgh (Shana Krallman), Gidget (Bridgette Schaefer), and Madeya Ink (Corby Selzer)

Back row, left to right: MJ (Shante Alcala), Disgrace Slick (Nicole Worthman), Duchess of Death (Leslie Crismore), Lady Blaze (Heather Cobb), Michelada (Bianca Preciado-Ramos), Dazzlynn (Lynn Frederico), and Gnarly (Naomi Stein Cooper)

A League of Their Own

THE CARQUINEZ REGION'S FIRST ROLLER DERBY LEAGUE BRINGS BIG HITS, BIG FUN, AND BIG COMMUNITY.

BY TRINA ENRIQUEZ

PHOTOS BY ROB WILLIAMSON

Got skates and a helmet, a badass style, and the attitude to match? Then consider lacing up for the Carquinez Quad Squad!

Roller derby might not be what comes to mind when you think of an activity promoting a strong sense of community, but the Carquinez Quad Squad in Benicia aims to change that.

The Squad officially kicked off in June 2019 as the first and (so far) only women's and gender-expansive flat-track roller derby league based in the Carquinez region. Although other flat-track leagues exist in the Bay Area—such as Undead Roller Derby in Antioch and Bay Area Derby in Oakland—the Carquinez Quad Squad gives Solano County its own homegrown team.

"There's a Board of Badasses to keep things running, but everyone in the league has a part to play," says Corby "Madeya Ink" Selzer, a Squad board member and head of the league's coaching committee. "It's enjoyable to watch women come together and run plays, and gratifying to be part of something so women-dominated."

Derby embraces women from all walks of life—grandmothers, single moms, businesswomen, college students—and welcomes first-time skaters as well as professionals. Currently, the league counts 15 active members.

When Selzer first started playing roller derby in 2012, it was mostly "short skirts [and] nylons," she says. Since then, the sport has evolved to focus chiefly on athletic ability, with an emphasis on its rough-and-tumble nature.

And while you can expect to see a lot of big hits on the track—with bruises to match—it's rare for someone to get seriously hurt.

"There's aggression you want to have, but it's controlled," says Selzer. "You're not trying to kill anyone but be an effective teammate."

Members practice at least once a week at rinks, paved trails, and skate parks, ramping up to three times before a bout. Beginners practice foundational skills before participating in a competition. And for the faint of heart, refereeing and other noncontact positions are available.

Ultimately, the Squad is about more than just skating. "People say derby is so badass, but it's also a lot of work to be athletic and juggle commitments and make a league successful," says Selzer. "In derby, you recognize the badass in others and lift each other up."

For more information, visit carquinezquadsquad.wordpress.com or follow @carquinezquadsquad. •

SKATE BREAK

WANT TO ROLL WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT GETTING CLOBBERED? **LATASHA RUBY** HAS YOU COVERED.

In July, the Vallejo mother of six started WeSkate, a roller-skating group organizing public skate sessions free for everyone to join. With more than 400 members, the group caters to all skill levels.

"You can skate with your kids, [and] you can skate with us," says Ruby. "I just want people to live life, have fun, and stay young."

Find out more at **WeSkate Vallejo.**

That Bay Area Glow

CROCKETT RESIDENT AND ARTIST BILL CONCANNON SHINES WITH BRILLIANT NEON ART CREATIONS.

BY CAITLIN MCCULLOCH

PHOTOS BY BOB SCHNELL

When it comes to art, few creators shine as brightly as Bill Concannon—literally. From King Kong atop the Empire State Building eating a cheesy slice at Arinell's Pizza in Berkeley to a vibrant pink vision inviting you to get inked at Crockett's Sugar City Tattoo Company, the neon artist's works can be spotted lighting up the Bay Area and beyond.

What started as an alternative to film school has blossomed into a decades-long career for Concannon.

"I went to high school in Los Angeles, so neon signs weren't new to me," he says. "I had met these guys in the business that were semiretired in their 80s working in the sign business. I thought to myself, 'This is something I can do for a long time, and that appeals to me.' And here I am."

Since 1987, Concannon has crafted dazzling works in his home of Crockett, which he cites as a source of inspiration.

"Crockett's always had a certain edge that it's never really lost," he says. "I connect with it on that level."

Concannon's try-things-until-you-succeed mentality has paid off over the years—and caught the eye of Hollywood. His work has been featured on the silver screen in critical darlings such as *Milk* and *Zodiac*, as well as blockbusters such as *The Matrix* and *Back to the Future I* and *II*.

"In *Back to the Future II*, Biff's Hotel is supposed to be 23 stories, but in reality, it was only seven-and-a-half feet tall," recalls Concannon. "I used internally lit letters and an outline in really tiny neon. The letters of the hotel were really small for how detailed they needed to be. You could easily fit them in the palm of your hand."

There isn't as much demand for neon signs in the Bay Area movie scene these days, but that doesn't bother Concannon, who's turned his focus to smaller projects.

"I'm doing things like small signs for windows and displays," he says. "It's kind of like a long marriage—you go back to the basics and fall in love all over again. For me, the most satisfying and successful thing is to produce something that looks good, is reliable, and everyone is really happy with." *aargon-neon.com* •

From top: Bill Concannon at work in his Crockett studio; King Kong at Arinell's Pizza in Berkeley; Troy Greek Cuisine in Martinez; the *Cars* logo Concannon designed for Pixar.

BOTTOM: COURTESY OF BILL CONCANNON (3)

Q & A

WITH LOUIS MICHAEL

The Vallejo resident is part of the new crop of activists leading the charge to demand justice for their communities. In June, he started Vessels of Vallejo, a community organization fighting police brutality in Vallejo and supporting the city's youth. We spoke with the young activist about his new organization, the struggle to make change, and why this movement is different.

Photojournalist and Martinez native Sarahbeth Maney shot this viral image of Louis Michael at an Oakland protest.

Raising His Voice

LOUIS MICHAEL HAD JUST GRADUATED WITH HIS BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN COMMUNICATIONS AND MOVED BACK TO VALLEJO WHEN GEORGE FLOYD WAS KILLED IN MINNESOTA. NOW, HIS LIFE HAS AN ENTIRELY NEW FOCUS.

PHOTOS BY SARAHBETH MANEY

What inspired you to take part in these protests?

When the protests first began, I went to an Oakland protest. I didn't [have a graduation] because of the coronavirus, so I went out in my cap and gown and protested. There were photos taken of me out there, and one of them went viral. It encouraged me to go to more protests and get more involved.

Every weekend, I was at a protest. Then, a friend invited me to help organize a protest out in Walnut Creek, and that was my first time getting involved in organizing. After that, another friend invited me to be a part of this organization called Richmond Revolution.

I was doing a lot of work for [them], but I felt like there was this need in Vallejo, so I decided to branch off and use the same framework as Richmond Revolution to start Vessels of Vallejo.

We had our first action on June 13, and it was to honor Sean Monterrosa as well as all the other victims of the Vallejo Police Department. We've connected with a lot of the other organizations in Vallejo that have been doing this work.

Many of the issues addressed by this movement—police brutality, racial inequality—are not new. What makes this time different?

I never lived through a particular movement. I'm 23. I've been hearing a lot of older folks and older generations talking about how they've never seen anything like this.

I'm a communications guy, so I know that a lot of it has to do with the technology that we have available today. With everyone having access to this information and being connected, it's so much easier to see something and get involved. ...

There's a lot of young people getting involved, and there's a lot of older people who we can learn from. There's a lot that can be accomplished by taking the wisdom of older people and the energy of young people and combining it all together to make an impact.

What were you seeing in Vallejo that led you to start your own organization?

I had just got back from Kansas; I'd been away for the last three years. I didn't know a lot of what was going on. Even today, people don't know what's happening in Vallejo. Unless you're really involved and paying attention, you're not going to know what's happening here.

I didn't plan on Vessels getting involved in defund the police work. I wanted to grow Vessels to be this community organization that had a wide variety of issues that we help out with, like homelessness and youth outreach. But once I met all of these families who had been impacted and all of these organizations that had been doing this work—[such as] Vallejo Peace Project and Justice Coalition of Vallejo—I was like, wow, I had no idea. I kind of had to get a reality check.

"It's never too late to get involved. Movements have come and gone, but this one is here to stay."
—*Louis Michael*

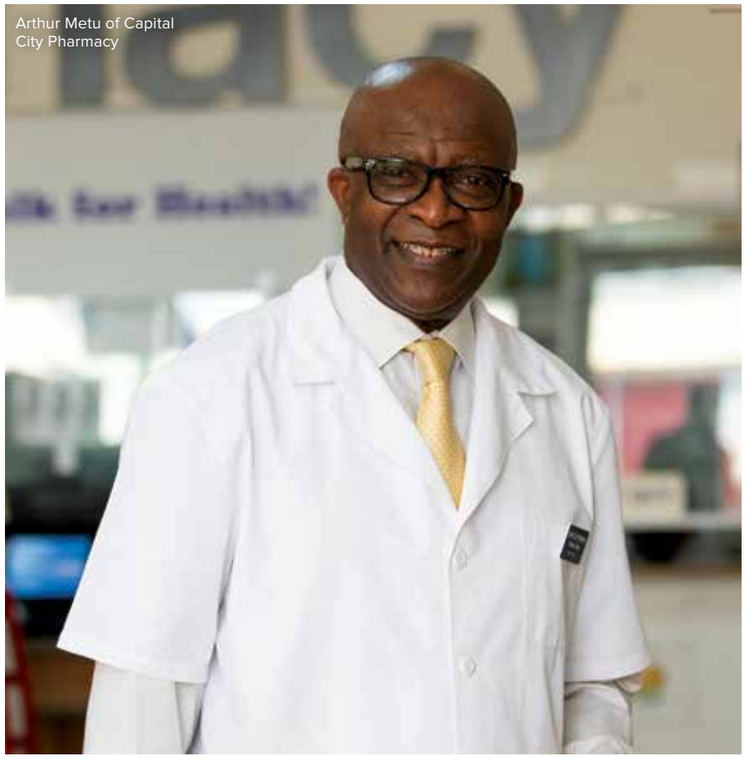
What message do you hope that Vallejoans and others outside of your community take away from your actions?

It's never too late to get involved. Movements have come and gone, but this one is here to stay, at least for a while.

It doesn't matter what you do and where you're from. Go out there and listen to these people who have been impacted directly. Listen to the families. Listen to the people of color. If you're not a person of color, try to be the best ally possible and center those voices who have lived this. If you are a person of color, get out there and have your voice heard. •

After this interview, Michael announced his candidacy for Vallejo City Council District 3. This article is not an endorsement. Follow Vessels of Vallejo at @vesselsofvallejo.

GO ONLINE TO SEE MORE
Read the full interview at **carquinezmagazine.com/louis-michael.**


Arthur Metu of Capital City Pharmacy

Mister Metu's Neighborhood

FOUR YEARS AGO, ARTHUR METU OPENED VALLEJO'S CAPITAL CITY PHARMACY—THE FRIENDLIEST CORNER DRUGSTORE THIS SIDE OF 1950.

BY MEGAN MCCREA // PHOTOS BY CALI GODLEY

Ask Arthur Metu what he'd be doing if he weren't running Vallejo's Capital City Pharmacy, and he doesn't hesitate a moment: "I'd be a teacher."

The 61-year-old certainly looks the part, with black-framed glasses, a ready smile, and a crisp uniform—button-up shirt and tie, slacks, and loafers. He sounds it, too: His voice is friendly yet authoritative, a slightly lilting baritone hinting at his cosmopolitan roots.

And he's had practice. Since opening Capital City in January 2016, he has trained eight aspiring pharmacists, including those applying for their license. "I love hearing, 'I passed!' " he says with a laugh.

At a time when most pharmacies are run out of big chain stores, the independent Capital City offers a more personal touch—underscored by Metu's own story of finding his way to Vallejo.

Born in Nigeria, Metu attended high school in London before returning to his native country to complete pharmacy school. He then moved to Oakland, where he received his pharmacy license for the state of California.

Working all over Northern California, Metu noticed that many of his clients were coming from Vallejo. Curious, he discovered that the city—home to three senior homes and a low-income housing complex—was severely "underserved," he says. "No place within walking distance to buy a Band-Aid or aspirin."

Inspired to help, Metu looked into launching his own pharmacy within the city limits. A history buff, he learned about Vallejo's past, including the fact that the city had served two brief stints as California's capital. "After reading that, I said, 'You know what? There's only one name befitting our pharmacy,' " he says.

Nine months later, Metu opened the doors at 339 Georgia Street, welcoming Capital City Pharmacy's first customers.

Since then, Metu has had ample opportunity to educate not just students but also his customers and patients. Under his tutelage, some of his regulars have made remarkable health gains: Patients with hypertension have been able to decrease their medication use, and some diabetic folks have gone off insulin entirely.

But where Metu is most impassioned is helping people to quit smoking. Since becoming a pharmacist, he's heard smokers trot out every excuse in the book. One of the most common? Stress.

For Metu, that explanation doesn't hold water. "When they say, 'Stress,' I say, 'Stress? Barack Obama quit smoking as president. Do you have more stress than the president of the United States?' "

Metu's tough love notwithstanding, it's clear that the community loves him back. Exhibit A: the COVID-19 screen. Back in March, with the pandemic raging, the pharmacist worried about protecting his customers and staff. He hoped to install a glass barrier at the cash register to limit potential exposure.

"I was telling a patient the challenge we were having and said I would call my contractor," explains Metu. "The next morning, he called me and said, 'Cancel that call to your contractor.' "

Later that day, the patient and his wife came over with the screen and installed it, charging nothing for the job.

Then there's the neighborhood couple who bring fresh flowers to the shop nearly every Saturday. "They've been doing it for over two years now," Metu says. "They just like us being here."

> "[Vallejo was] underserved. No place within walking distance to buy a Band-Aid or aspirin."
> —*Arthur Metu*

But perhaps one of his favorite moments happened this summer. A student who had worked at Capital City for more than a year was about to graduate and asked Metu to hood him. "I was supposed to be at his graduation," the pharmacist recalls, adding that the student was planning to move to Arizona soon after. "But because of COVID, that couldn't happen."

But a few days before leaving California, the new graduate stopped by the pharmacy "in his graduation outfit, and we took some pictures," Metu says. "He was one of the best I ever had." *339 Georgia St., Vallejo, capcitypharmacy.com* •

IN 1944, 50 BLACK SAILORS DEFIED THEIR ORDERS IN THE FACE OF A DEADLY DISASTER AND DISCRIMINATION.

BEFORE THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, BEFORE BLACK LIVES MATTER—THERE WERE **THE PORT CHICAGO 50.**

MUTINY in Port Chicago

BY CASEY CANTRELL

ILLUSTRATION BY
Alex Nabaum

JULY 17, 1944. WORLD WAR II CONTINUED TO RAGE. In the Bay Area, Navy ships streamed in and out of the Port Chicago Naval Magazine on their way west to fight the Japanese fleet. Just like any other day, enlisted Black sailors at the munitions depot toiled around the clock to transfer tons of ordnance—small arms ammunition, depth charges, artillery shells, and massive 2,000-pound bombs—from train cars to waiting ships, their tireless work supporting a war effort that had already seen some of the biggest and most brutal naval battles in history.

But that night, along the tranquil shores of the Carquinez Strait, a different battle was about to take place—one that would result in the deadliest stateside disaster of World War II and force a nation to reckon with its racist disregard of Black lives.

THE FUSE

Constructed shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine joined the existing Mare Island Navy Yard to quickly transform the region into a major munitions hub. Every day, the port conveyed hundreds of tons of materiel onto ships destined for the Pacific front.

But behind the prestige, the munitions depot also revealed the country at its worst.

VALLEJO NAVAL AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM

During World War II, all branches of the U.S. military were segregated, with bases adopting Jim Crow laws in an effort to appease white Southerners. Port Chicago was no different—the 1,400 enlisted Black men assigned to the base used separate barracks and mess halls. Although they received specialized training at Naval Station Great Lakes—one of the only Navy facilities that instructed Black recruits—the men were put to work as laborers, loading and unloading ordnance under demanding and dangerous conditions. Only Black men handled munitions, and they were paid less than their white counterparts.

Problems emerged almost immediately. White officers called the enlisted men unreliable and inept; in turn, the Black men were distrustful of leadership. Captain Merrill T. Kinne, who commanded the munitions depot, failed to provide adequate training on proper procedures and safety regulations, believing the Black sailors were too incompetent to internalize instruction. (Ironically, Kinne and the officers serving under him had little to no experience handling munitions.)

At the same time, the officers in charge made impossible demands. Captain Nelson Goss, who commanded the Mare Island Navy Yard and whose jurisdiction included Port Chicago, set a goal of loading 10 tons per ship hatch per hour. Such a task would be a tall order even for professional stevedores; for enlisted men with no formal training, it was simply unfeasible.

Nevertheless, officers pushed the sailors to work harder and faster. Kinne encouraged competition between the enlisted men by turning the work into a contest, offering rewards such as free movie screenings for the quickest crews. Junior officers charged with supervising 100-man divisions placed bets with each other over which crew could load the fastest.

"The officers used to pit one division against the other," Joseph Small, one of the sailors at the base, later recalled. "I often heard them argue over what division was beating the others."

When some sailors raised misgivings about working with large explosives, they were dismissed by their superiors, who wrongly assured them that the munitions were not active and couldn't detonate.

As a result, officers and sailors started cutting corners: Safety regulations went ignored; equipment was used improperly and began breaking down; munitions were damaged, leaking contents onto the pier. Commander Paul B. Cronk, a member of the Coast Guard in charge of supervising the dock, warned the Navy that worsening conditions could lead to catastrophe for the base and the men stationed there.

But the Navy ignored him. The sailors continued loading munitions, inching closer to deadly disaster.

THE EXPLOSION

The night of July 17, 1944, was like any other night at the port. On the main pier, two divisions of Black sailors toiled under harsh floodlights, transferring munitions from tightly packed boxcars onto the USS *E.A. Bryan* and preparing the newly arrived USS *Quinault Victory* for loading. Supervising the men were nine white officers and 29 white Marines; also present were the crews of both ships and a Coast Guard fire barge.

The *E.A. Bryan* was already packed with more than 4,600 tons of explosives and ammunitions, including depth charges, cluster bombs, 1,000-pound bombs, and 650-pound incendiary bombs, while another 400 tons of ordnance sat in boxcars or on the dock.

It is unclear what occurred next. At around 10:18 p.m., witnesses described a metallic crash followed by a deafening boom and a blast of fire—the first explosion. A few seconds later, the ordnance aboard the *E.A. Bryan* was ignited.

The violence of the explosion defied belief. A massive fireball measuring three miles in diameter could be seen for miles. White-hot metal shot more than 12,000 feet into the air, scattering shrapnel across the area. The blast crumpled buildings in the town of Port Chicago and shattered windows as far away as San Francisco; the shock wave registered on seismographs at UC Berkeley, measuring 3.4 on the Richter scale. The 500-foot-long *Quinault Victory* was flung into the air like a toy, breaking apart and falling 500 feet away. The *E.A. Bryan* was essentially obliterated. The explosion's force was the equivalent of five kilotons of TNT—a third of the magnitude of the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Every person working within 1,000 feet of the pier—320 men, including 202 Black sailors—died instantly. Another 390 people—233 of them Black—were maimed or injured. In a matter of seconds, the Port Chicago disaster became one of the deadliest wartime events in U.S. history.

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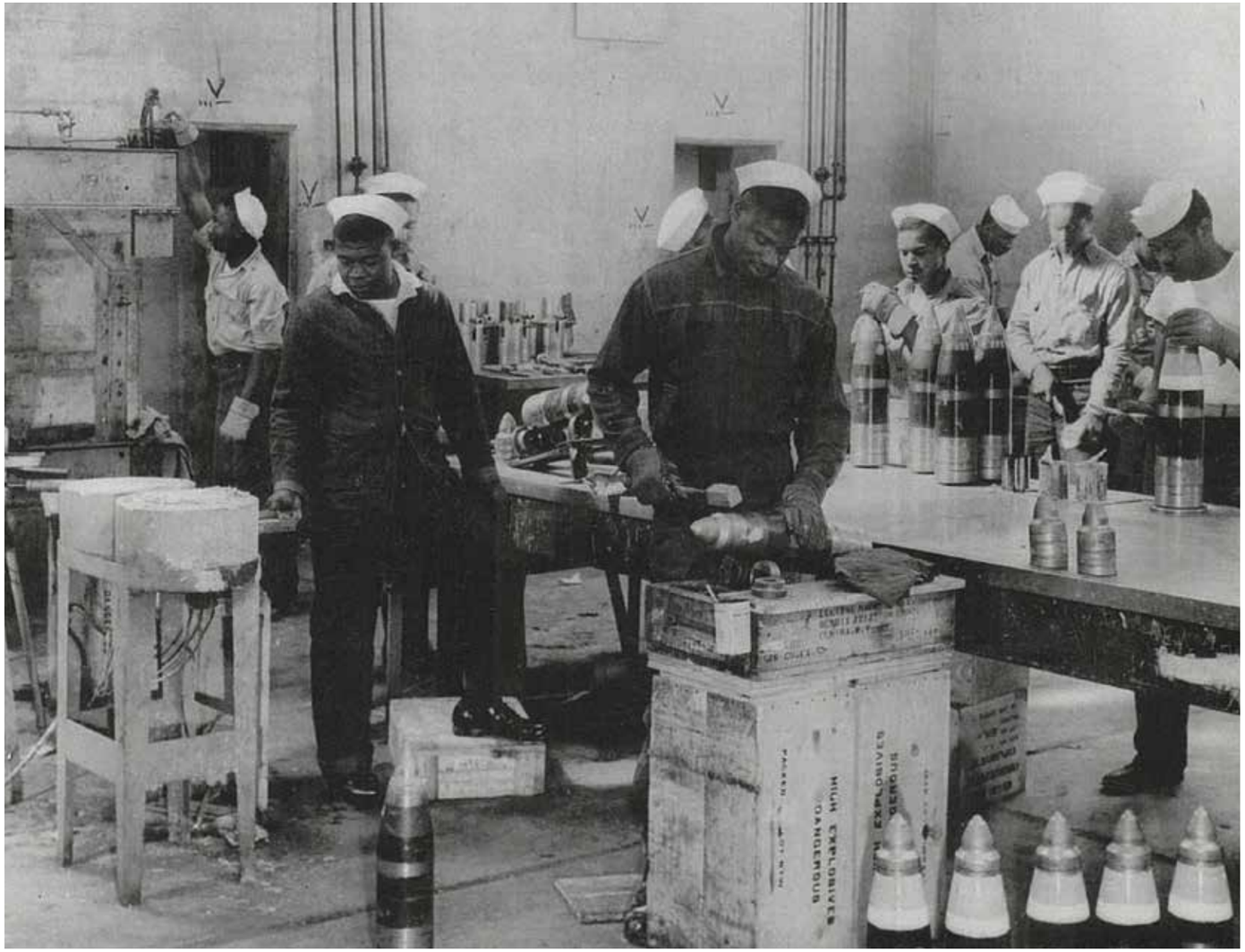
CASCADE EFFECT
A loading mishap decimated the Port Chicago naval base, killing hundreds in seconds.

But for the Black survivors, the tragedy only underscored their unequal status. About 200 of the enlisted men were assigned to cleanup detail, clearing rubble and collecting the bodies of their fellow sailors, while the white officers received a month of leave to recover. While many of the Black sailors asked for 30-day survivor's leave—given to those who experienced a traumatic event where shipmates had died—the Navy denied their requests.

Less than a month later, more than 300 of the survivors were moved to the Mare Island Navy Yard and told to go back to work loading munitions.



VALLEJO NAVAL AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM

VALLEJO NAVAL AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM

HAZARDOUS MATERIALS
Black Navy sailors received inadequate training to handle dangerous munitions. The resulting explosion buckled buildings across the base.

THE MUTINY

In the aftermath of the disaster, the Navy convened a Board of Inquiry to investigate the events leading up to the explosion. Junior officers argued the competition put in place by Kinne contributed to unsafe conditions, but the Navy captain denied the accusation. Ultimately, he and the other officers were cleared of any wrongdoing.

Instead, the court blamed the Black sailors, concluding that "the colored enlisted personnel [were] neither temperamentally or intellectually capable of handling high explosives."

Meanwhile, a plan by Congress to compensate the families of victims with a one-time payment of $5,000 was obstructed after Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi discovered the majority of the deceased were Black. He insisted that compensation be reduced to $2,000; Congress settled on $3,000.

Of course, the war was still happening, and U.S. soldiers fighting overseas needed munitions. While most of the sailors stationed at Port Chicago were sent to Oakland, three divisions were reassigned to load munitions at the naval yard on Mare Island. Incredibly, the Navy provided the men no new training, implemented no new safeguards, and placed the same white officers who oversaw the Port Chicago disaster in charge.

The survivors were rattled and stressed. "Everybody was scared," recalled Percy Robinson, one of the survivors of the Port Chicago disaster. "If somebody dropped a box or slammed a door, people [began] jumping around like crazy."

Despite the compromised condition of the men, the Navy pushed forward with its plans. On Aug. 9, 1944, officers ordered the Black sailors to the dock to start loading ordnance. But on their way from the barracks to the dock, all 328 men suddenly stopped marching.

Under questioning from the officers, 70 sailors changed their mind and continued to the dock, but the rest stayed put. They were taken to a temporary brig—a barge built to accommodate only 75 men. Even though conditions in the barge were abysmal, the men were more terrified of the possibility of another explosion.

"I wasn't trying to shirk work," explained Small, who, at the age of 23, was one of the oldest members of the group. "I don't think these other men were trying to shirk work. But to go back to work under the same conditions, with no improvements, no changes, the same group of officers that we had … we thought there was a better alternative."

Again, the men's concerns were dismissed. The Navy threatened to charge the 258 men with mutiny and place them in front of a firing squad. Most of the sailors capitulated. (Despite agreeing to return to work, these men were still punished; President Franklin D. Roosevelt recommended sentences of bad-conduct discharges—effectively eliminating almost all veterans' benefits for the sailors—and the loss of three months' pay.)

> "Everybody was scared. If somebody dropped a box or slammed a door, people [began] jumping around like crazy."
> *—Percy Robinson*

But some of the men continued to stand their ground. Led by Small, 44 sailors refused to follow orders. Three days later, they were joined by six more men who had changed their minds.

Together, they were dubbed the Port Chicago 50.

THE TRIAL

The 50 men were arrested and taken to Camp Shoemaker in Dublin, where they were interrogated by officers and asked to sign a summary of their testimony. The men complained the statements were often inaccurate or misrepresentative; nevertheless, many of the men were coerced into signing.

The trial that followed was a formality. Prosecutors hurled racial invectives against the defendants, using the manipulated statements as evidence of their dishonesty. (In one infamous exchange, a defendant argued that he couldn't handle munitions because of a broken wrist, to which lead prosecutor Lieutenant Commander James F. Oakley quipped that "there were plenty of things a one-armed man could do on the ammunition dock.")

FROM LABORERS TO MUTINEERS
Less than a month after the Port Chicago disaster, survivors were moved to the Mare Island Navy Yard to continue loading munitions. Of the 328 Black men reassigned to Mare Island, 50 of them refused to work.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: VALLEJO NAVAL AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM; NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND; VALLEJO NAVAL AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

> "The Port Chicago 50 were brave men who, despite the hardships they faced, honorably served their country, and their true story deserves to be told."
>
> *—Congressman Mark DeSaulnier*

After six weeks of hearings, the court took less than two hours to render a verdict: guilty. The men were sentenced to 15 years of hard labor and a dishonorable discharge from the Navy.

That might have been the end of the story, but Navy commanders made a tactical error: Hoping to discourage further insubordination among Black recruits, the Navy played up the trial, promoting it as the largest in its history and inviting press to attend. News of the case reached the NAACP, which sent its chief counsel, Thurgood Marshall, to observe the proceedings.

Marshall immediately denounced the entire process as a sham. "This is not 50 men on trial for mutiny," he said. "This is the Navy on trial for its whole vicious policy toward Negroes."

In April 1945, Marshall filed an appeal on behalf of the convicted men. The motion was denied, but the future Supreme Court justice's efforts to shine a light on the case made an impact. Rather than quell discord, the trial only succeeded in highlighting the Navy's systemic racism. Concerned citizens—including former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt—flooded the Navy with letters and petitions demanding justice for the Port Chicago 50.

In response to this and other events, the Navy began changing its policies, slowly integrating its forces. On Jan. 6, 1946—16 months after they were convicted—47 of the 50 men were granted clemency and released. (Two stayed in a hospital recuperating from injuries; the third remained incarcerated due to a bad conduct record.)

One month later, the Navy became the first military branch to desegregate its ranks. Two years later, President Harry Truman would sign an executive order desegregating all U.S. forces.

THEIR LEGACY

After their release, the enlisted men served overseas for a year, then were discharged "under honorable conditions." The discharge would cost them their veterans' benefits.

Although hailed by civil rights activists as the early vanguard of the civil rights movement, none of the 50 have been officially exonerated of their guilty verdicts. In 1999, President Bill Clinton issued a pardon to Freddie Meeks, the last surviving member of the Port Chicago 50 and the only one to receive a pardon. (Meeks passed away in 2003.)

That, in part, was by design. Some of the men actively refused to receive a pardon, seeing it as an admission of guilt. "That means, 'You're guilty, but we forgive you,' " explained Small before his death in 1996. "We want the decisions set aside."

In fact, Meeks sought a pardon to raise awareness of the unjust treatment he and others had received. "I hope that all of America knows about it," he said at the time. "It's something that's been in the closet for so long."

Efforts have been made to exonerate the men. In 1994, Congressman George Miller called on Navy leaders to overturn the verdict. The Navy refused, arguing that while bigotry informed the assignments given to the men, the convictions themselves were not "tainted by racial prejudice." Last year, Congressman Mark DeSaulnier passed a bill directing the Navy to exonerate the Port Chicago 50, but the measure found no traction in the Senate.

"The Port Chicago 50 were brave men who, despite the hardships they faced, honorably served their country, and their true story deserves to be told," says DeSaulnier. "Their families and our nation cannot heal until this racial injustice is corrected, and we will continue our efforts in Congress until that happens."

Despite the stalled legislation, the sailors' legacy of bravery remains just as powerful 76 years later.

Today, the former munitions depot sits quiet except for the sounds of chirping birds and lapping water. Dedicated in 1994, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial commemorates those who lost their lives as well as those who courageously stood their ground. It speaks to the power of individuals who protest inequality and injustice—and what they can accomplish when they take a stand together.

"Everything we've gotten, we've fought for and suffered for," Martin Bordenave, one of the Port Chicago 50, later said. "You got to holler loud." •

VISIT THE PORT CHICAGO MEMORIAL
Make a reservation at **nps.gov/poch**.

THE PORT CHICAGO 50

ALMOST A CENTURY AGO, THE ACTIONS OF 50 BLACK SAILORS HIGHLIGHTED THE DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES OF THE U.S. NAVY, ULTIMATELY RESULTING IN THE DESEGREGATION OF ALL U.S. MILITARY BRANCHES. **THESE ARE THEIR NAMES:**

Julius J. Allen, Mack Anderson, Douglas G. Anthony, William E. Banks, Arnett Baugh, Morris Berry, Martin A. Bordenave, Ernest D. Brown, Robert L. Burnage, Mentor G. Burns, Zack Credle, Jack P. Crittenden, Hayden R. Curd, Charles L. David Jr., Herbert Davis, Bennon Dees, George W. Diamond, Kenneth C. Dixon, Julius Dixon, John H. Dunn, Melvin W. Ellis, William Fleece, James Floyd, Ernest J. Gaines, John L. Gipson, Charles C. Gray, Ollie L. Green, Harry E. Grimes, Charles N. Hazzard, Frank L. Henry, Richard W. Hill, Theodore King, Perry L. Knox, William H. Lock, Edward L. Longmire, Miller Matthews, Augustus P. Mayor, Howard McGee, Lloyd McKinney, Alphonso McPherson, Freddie Meeks, Cecil Miller, Fleetwood H. Postell, Edward Saunders, Cyril O. Sheppard, Joseph R. Small, William C. Suber, Edward L. Waldrop, Charles S. Widemon, Albert Williams Jr.

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ENJOY LUXURY SENIOR LIVING WITH PEACE OF MIND AT **THE LODGE IN GLEN COVE.**

Incredible views of the Carquinez Strait. A safe, cutting-edge facility run by compassionate staff. An engaged community with a fun, social atmosphere.

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The Lodge community includes 101 assisted living units and 40 units enhanced for residents needing memory care. All units offer unique benefits, starting with a dedicated management team boasting more than 50 years of experience. Your loved ones will enjoy expansive living spaces, choosing from studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom floor plans; gorgeous courtyards and walking paths; and other amenities including a cafe, theater room, and full-service salon, plus off-site trips to restaurants, casinos, and more.

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SCHEDULE A TOUR TODAY by contacting **cathy@glencoveseniorliving.com** or **(707) 287-2615.** The first 50 residents will become members of the Harbor Club, receiving exclusive perks such as reduced rates, free weekly movies, and more.

THE AVIATOR CARE PROGRAM

The Lodge at Glen Cove offers state-of-the-art care for residents with cognitive impairment with the Aviator Care Program. Specially designed to give residents superb quality of life while keeping them safe and healthy, this program provides peace of mind that your loved one will receive the support they need.

MEET THE CARQUINEZ HEALTHCARE HEROES

Michael Gloudeman, a pharmacy student at Touro University California, helps oversee COVID-19 screenings at Mare Island Dry Dock LLC.

In February, the first cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. started to appear. By April, the entire nation was plunged into crisis. Our region was no exception, as schools and businesses shuttered while medical facilities scrambled to respond to the ongoing pandemic.

Yet amid all the chaos, healthcare workers remained steadfast in their duty. Despite equipment shortages, erratic public policies, and the unpredictable nature of the virus, they continued to do what they have always done best—care for and protect the community.

From emergency rooms to the docks of Mare Island, these are a few of their stories.

BY CASEY CANTRELL

PHOTOS BY LIA CECACI

PREVENTING OUTBREAKS AMONG THE MOST VULNERABLE

The homeless community in Contra Costa County lives in the kind of conditions that make it vulnerable to infectious diseases: Without reliable shelter, it can be incredibly difficult to practice social distancing. Many individuals are hampered with chronic illness and preexisting conditions that leave them susceptible to the worst outcomes of the virus. Handwashing for 20 seconds? Nearly impossible to do without access to running water.

But while the pandemic has penetrated schools, businesses, and homes, the region's homeless community has so far evaded the deadly viral spread that's overwhelmed the nation, thanks in large part to the medical providers of Contra Costa County's Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) program.

It hasn't been easy. Before the pandemic, HCH would conduct 20-plus mobile clinics every week, providing on-site care at homeless encampments. By early April, the number of clinics had shrunk to twice per week, as staff couldn't ensure proper social distancing. And while they continued to provide care, many of the program's healthcare providers have struggled to cope with the emotional burnout of working through a pandemic.

> "We're trying to keep people out of the hospitals, and we're exhausted. Follow the rules and do what it takes to stay well. Protect others and protect yourself."
> *—Beth Gaines, RN, Health Care for the Homeless*

"At first, [my colleagues] weren't sure if they were bringing the virus home to their families," says Beth Gaines, a registered nurse and the program manager of HCH. "I saw a coworker sobbing, because she hadn't seen her mother for two months."

Nevertheless, Gaines and her colleagues adapted quickly. They converted their mobile clinic for COVID-19 testing and began transitioning hundreds of at-risk patients from shelters and encampments into hotels, where they set up on-site care.

"It's been a huge change. It was figuring out different ways to provide our services that didn't feel intuitive," says Gaines, who is also a deacon at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Benicia. Still, she believes their efforts have paid off. "Many of the homeless are in their 50s and 60s and have serious comorbidities. It's hard to prove a negative, but it feels like … we've managed to prevent any outbreaks in the homeless population."

Stopping viral spread before it starts is just one part of HCH's work. Patients who test positive or show symptoms but are not sick enough to be admitted to a hospital must quarantine in a hotel room for at least two weeks, disrupting their routines and cutting them off from family and friends. For many of them, the HCH staff is their only outside connection.

"You pull people out of their lives and stick them in a hotel room—it's boring, it's isolating," says Gaines. "We bring little snacks; we bring games and books. Even though we're at the door in full personal protective equipment (PPE) and standing six feet away, we try to support them and say they're doing really great."

Gaines doesn't mince words when it comes to praising her staff. "I'm amazed by their dedication," she says. "Our nurses are outstanding. They go above and beyond."

Nevertheless, she emphasizes the need for the community to help keep an already terrible health crisis from becoming worse.

"We're trying to keep people out of the hospitals, and we're exhausted," says Gaines. "Follow the rules and do what it takes to stay well. Protect others and protect yourself."

FIGHTING FOR SAFER HEALTHCARE

As the charge nurse of the night shift in the emergency room (ER) of Vallejo's Sutter Solano Medical Center, Jolayne Haines knows a thing or two about handling a tough work environment. For the past 18 years, she has tended to broken bones, heart attacks, and other gruesome maladies. She is trained to prepare for the worst.

She wasn't prepared for this.

"We're geared to deal with the unexpected, but when you're bombarded constantly, when you have so many patients that you can't leave for a break, it's draining," says the Fairfield resident.

Working in the ER, where even a slow day is chaotic, she and her colleagues are often the first line of defense in responding to patients potentially sick with COVID-19—and that's on top of the regular clientele they encounter.

"The emergency room still sees the critical patients we normally see," she says. "We still see strokes, we still see heart attacks, we still see people who've been shot."

As a result, staffing has been stretched thin, even as the ER's patient intake has decreased by about 20 percent. ("People try to stay away from the ER now," explains Haines.) An ER nurse is typically given a maximum caseload of four patients, but nowadays, people are coming in sicker.

Jolayne Haines, RN

"We get people with a lot of respiratory problems," says Haines. "Those are critical patients. You can't do four patients per nurse. We don't forget them, but they don't get the care they need."

That isn't the only obstacle Haines and her colleagues face. In an effort to prevent shortages, the hospital has stockpiled and restricted access to vital supplies of PPE. That means ER staff must often treat patients without adequate protection.

"When Ebola hit [in 2014], we were wearing hazmat suits, putting up tents," says Haines. But now, "nurses are having to use the same mask for the whole [12-hour] shift. The hospital has the equipment; it's just not giving it out. It's not safe."

For Haines, the lack of available PPE is especially dangerous—she has lupus, an autoimmune disorder that makes her more vulnerable to the virus. But Haines is far less concerned about her own personal safety than the well-being of her patients.

"If I get sick, who's going to take care of the people who are sick?" she says.

To bring awareness to the issue, Haines and other nurses have participated in rallies demanding safer work environments for healthcare workers, including increased staffing, more access to


Beth Gaines, RN, stands in front of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Benicia, where she serves as a deacon.

PPE, and allowing the use of outside equipment such as donated masks and 3D-printed face shields.

Sutter Health, the medical center's parent network, contends the hospital is equipped to deal with the current crisis. "We've deployed safety protocols ... and provide appropriate PPE for staff to use in the course of patient care in accordance with established state and federal guidelines," a Sutter Health spokesperson says. "While our PPE supply remains adequate, we continue to closely manage the network's PPE, so we can meet critical community need while maintaining patient and frontline staff safety."

But Haines insists that without further action, the situation is only to get worse. She notes that other local hospitals are directing more and more traffic to Sutter Solano because they're at full capacity. Furthermore, she's seeing a greater frequency of younger patients—and not just adults.

"I can tell you that there are kids who have been positive. That was something that surprised a lot of us," she says. "You hear that kids can't get it, but that's not true. We're worried about what's going to happen if we don't get it under control."

For patients who are admitted, many of them now find themselves suddenly alone. "The only way you're allowed [to go with a patient] into the hospital is if your loved one is dying, if your partner is having a baby, or if you're a minor," says Haines. "You don't have a support system. That's another job that we have to do—give emotional support that we didn't have to before."

Despite her concerns, Haines remains hopeful. She is inspired by the dedication and compassion of her team—"they do a lot to protect me"—and the general public.

"We've eaten more pizza than we probably should," she says, laughing. "I'm amazed at how the community's banded together. As a nurse who cares for others as a living, I'm grateful for the love and support. It makes me proud, honored, and rejuvenated to serve [them], especially during these difficult times."

Nevertheless, more can be done—and it'll take the public's support to make it happen, says Haines.

"What we really need are safe working conditions," she says. "We need to push the [hospital] administration to do what is safe for the staff. When pressure is applied publicly and internally, that's when change is made. The administration isn't heartless. They'll listen if there's a concerted effort."

PROTECTING ESSENTIAL WORKERS

While medical professionals grapple with the pandemic, essential workers from every industry continue to show up to work, often without the same rigorous safeguards that have become commonplace in healthcare settings.

That is the case at Mare Island Dry Dock LLC (MIDD), where dozens of workers mill about the 18-acre site, the noise of buzzing tools, sparking metal, and massive machinery drowning out the sounds of the Mare Island Strait. On any given day, ships from around the world—cruise ships, U.S. military ships, commercial freighters—will arrive at the facility for repairs, forcing dock employees to work in confined spaces and increasing their risk of exposure to a virus that has touched every part of the globe.

But as other docks struggle to contain outbreaks, MIDD has reported zero cases of virus transmission as of press time.

This unexpected success is a credit to a rotating group of about eight medical and pharmacy students from Touro University California. Every day since mid-July, student volunteers have gathered at the dock in full PPE at 6 a.m., checking the temperatures of each and every person who shows up in order to prevent potentially symptomatic individuals from becoming unwitting vectors of the disease.

For volunteers Michael Gloudeman and Isabella Hamilton, the reason to help is simple.

"It's keeping people employed. That's important to me," says Gloudeman, a PharmD candidate. "You can't sit behind a laptop and weld."

"We aren't required to do community service, but it's something we all do," adds Hamilton, who's studying osteopathy. "I want to serve other people. It's the reason why I want to do medicine."

Entering their second year at Touro, Gloudeman and Hamilton were among the first students to sign up for the Touro Student Services Core, a COVID-19 emergency response initiative designed to connect students with community service opportunities. After being assigned to MIDD, the pair quickly established procedures to screen workers, including a self-report questionnaire and an on-site temperature check, as well as educating them on the importance of screening.

"A lot of what we were doing was building the process and getting people comfortable with it," says Hamilton. "We're trying to explain that it helps keep them safe, and it helps keep other people safe. It's just normalizing the behavior."

The students' biggest test came on Aug. 16, when the USS *Emory S. Land*—a U.S. Navy submarine tender carrying 300 sailors and 150 civilian workers—landed at the dry dock for repairs after a deployment to Guam.

Despite having to process about four times as many people and dealing with a technical glitch that prevented workers from taking the questionnaire at first, the students managed to ramp up screening with very few hiccups—catching the attention of local officials.

"The Vallejo City Council is very interested in it. They've come out and gone through the screening," says Gloudeman. "The Navy could be interested in it. It could be a model for other industries."

Whatever the case, the screenings will continue for the duration of the ship's stay through January—and Gloudeman and Hamilton are ready to help as long as they're needed.

"Every year of medical school, you're facing a different challenge," says Hamilton. "I didn't expect to be doing this, but it's been ... very fulfilling for me."

Gloudeman adds with a laugh: "Turns out you don't need as much sleep as you think." •

sip & savor

Owners Tiffany and Marco McCleod of The Grind Cafe

Rise and Grind

TIFFANY AND MARCO MCCLEOD OF THE GRIND CAFE DELIGHT VALLEJO WITH DELICIOUS EATS AND DRINKS.

BY CAREY SWEET

PHOTOS BY ROB WILLIAMSON

Tiffany McCleod offers up warm brews with a smile at The Grind Cafe.

Tiffany and Marco McCleod knew they were onto something when they first tasted their experimental batch of Lavender White Mocha. The creation—a frothy mix of lavender syrup; white chocolate sauce; espresso; and steamed, frothy milk—was delicious, and it quickly became a best seller at their coffee shop in Vallejo, The Grind Cafe.

"Most people don't equate lavender with their coffee, but when mixed with the white mocha, it's like a flavor explosion," says Tiffany.

Both Vallejo natives, the husband-and-wife duo would never have thought they would own and run a cafe, but opportunity struck after an encounter with The Grind Cafe's previous owner.

"I worked across the street [at the Solano County Superior Court] as an accounting clerk, and I would frequent this coffee shop on my breaks and lunches," recalls Tiffany. "I remember talking with the owner at the time, and I would always inquire about how she got the coffee shop—not knowing I would own it four years later."

The McCleods officially took over last year, reopening the shop in August 2019. Ever since, Tiffany is convinced it was meant to be.

"I have always loved coffee shops," she says. "Coffee shops are calming, and they were my go-to when I needed to unwind or needed a quiet place to get my thoughts together. I realized people are tired, overworked, and need a place of rest and relaxation. It has always been in my heart to create a space where people can feel a sense of peace from the everyday hustle and bustle."

It took some convincing, though. After some back-and-forth, Marco—who also works as the pastor at the couple's church, Revive Ministry—was finally persuaded to run the kitchen at the cafe, preparing every sandwich, salad, and breakfast burrito fresh to order.

As it turns out, he and Tiffany are naturals at the restaurant business. Every day, the couple cooks up "homemade goodness" in the form of savory Super Breakfast Burritos (packed with sausage, bacon, potatoes, eggs, cheese, salsa, and sour cream), fragrant coffee (sourced from local artisan roaster Moschetti), and a rotating selection of sweet treats (chocolate-chip cookies, 7Up cake made from a family recipe handed down by "Auntie Ann," and peach cobbler, to name a few).

> "It has always been in my heart to create a space where people can feel a sense of peace from the everyday hustle and bustle."
> *—Tiffany McCleod*

The cafe's decadent menu and cozy atmosphere have won the McCleods a passionate following. Despite the pandemic and racial unrest splintering the community, customers still converge for take-out hickory-smoked bacon BLTs, hot pastrami and provolone on toasted Dutch Crunch rolls, and giant croissants overstuffed with thick sliced ham and oceans of melty Colby-Jack and cheddar.

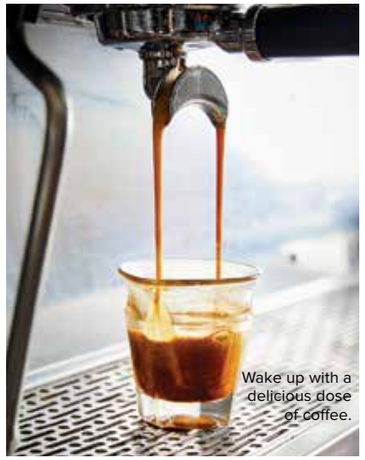
"Thankfully, our business has actually picked up since COVID," says Tiffany. "The support from the community has been tremendous."

In fact, things are so busy that the parents of four have recruited family to help out, including their daughter, cousins, close friends, and "Aunt Geraldine," who makes the cafe's popular soups. Another friend shared a favorite recipe for a jalapeno popper burrito that's plump with bacon, sausage, egg, shredded cheese, salsa, and cream cheese.

Still, the family finds time away from work to spend with each other.

"When we're not at church or at the cafe, we spend time with our kids watching movies, camping, or other outdoor activities with our dog, Brillo," says Tiffany. "Marco and I also make it a point to have a date night often. COVID has made it difficult to hang out, but we make the best of it."

And they're making the best of it at The Grind Cafe. It helps that work doesn't feel like, well, a grind.


Wake up with a delicious dose of coffee.

"It brings me joy to see people catch up with old friends over a cup of coffee or have lunch with colleagues, talking about their families and catching up on work," says Tiffany. "I also love seeing people write their blogs or books or work on their individual projects. All this takes place at our cafe, and I love having the place to provide that."

402 Tuolumne St., Vallejo, yourgrindcafe707.com •


Sonia Giovanazzi and Massimo Biatta stand inside the future Amore Bistrot.

A Family's Dream Put on Hold

AFTER YEARS OF PLANNING, THE BIATTA-GIOVANAZZIS WERE READY TO LAUNCH A NEW RESTAURANT IN BENICIA. THE PANDEMIC HAD OTHER PLANS.

BY LAUREN BONNEY // PHOTOS BY BOB SCHNELL

In February, Massimo Biatta and Sonia Giovanazzi and their two sons, Lorenzo and Giacamo, walked through the arrival doors at SFO looking slightly dazed, as one does after a long transatlantic flight. Their three trolleys were piled high with luggage containing their entire lives—and the last reminder of their home in Milan, Italy.

Relief washed across each face as they spotted their friends, Dennis and Tracee Varni, who were waiting to ferry the family to their new home in Benicia and the next exciting step in their adventure—opening their own Italian restaurant.

And then, the world shut down.

Unbeknownst to the family—affectionately referred to as "the Italians"—they had caught the last flight from Milan before the U.S. closed its borders to international arrivals in an attempt to prevent further spreading of the coronavirus. Having just escaped one outbreak, the Biatta-Giovanazzis found themselves stuck in a new country, completely isolated from their friends and family back in Italy.

If any of the family were having second thoughts, there was no turning back now.

BEST-LAID PLANS...

After quarantining for 15 days in Lafayette, Biatta and Giovanazzi were finally free to begin work on Amore Bistrot, the restaurant and cafe they were set to open at The Inn at Benicia Bay. Although the pandemic kicked off the project on a decidedly distressing note, Massimo and Sonia remained undeterred. After all, it was a dream two years in the making.

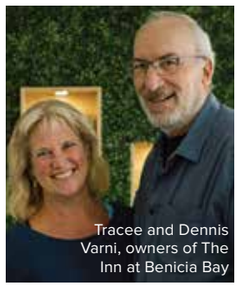
Biatta and Giovanazzi first spoke with the Varnis, who own the inn, about starting a bistro in Benicia during one of their annual group vacations (the families have taken turns visiting each other since 2015). Initially, it was just a "what if" scenario tossed around in casual conversation at the dinner table, but with each visit to the U.S., the Italians fell more and more in love with the charming waterfront town. Soon, "what if" turned into "let's do it."

"We decided to ... come here and cook really incredible food for the community," says Biatta. "We arrived here with high expectations."

Feeding his friends, family, and community has been one of Biatta's great joys. Owing his cooking prowess to his mom—"it's in his DNA," says Giovanazzi—the culinary professional has transformed the art of cooking into something more.

"For Italian people, food is not something you eat when you are hungry," explains Giovanazzi. "Food is deeper and uses all the senses. It's not just something you put in your mouth. It's love."

And love was exactly what they hoped to share with their new neighbors. The feeling was mutual, as Benicians eagerly awaited their arrival. But instead of fanfare, the Italians were met with social distancing and shelter-in-place orders.


Tracee and Dennis Varni, owners of The Inn at Benicia Bay

"At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a lot of confusion as to whether we could go out or not," Giovanazzi recalls. "We either stayed in the house or at the inn."

While navigating a public health crisis in the middle of moving across the world would be challenging for anyone, it's been especially difficult for sons Lorenzo, 16, and Giacamo, 14. Outside of the Varnis and their parents, the two teenagers knew no one upon their arrival in the Bay Area. And with Benicia's schools closed and recreational activities limited (the boys were part of tennis and soccer teams back in Italy), gone were easy opportunities to make new friends.

Hoping to create some semblance of normalcy, Lorenzo and Giacamo turned to their love of tennis to pass the time, playing each other for hours at the community tennis courts—until the courts were shut down, too.

Fortunately for the brothers, food and family have kept them anchored.

"They never complained once," says Biatta. "Our family is very close and it's important for us to eat together and sit around the table to have a conversation. And food is the reason why. It brings people together."

STARTING OVER

As time passed, the family became more used to the new normal. They organized nightly concerts on the inn's front lawn (an homage to the balcony concerts that took place during Italy's lockdown), drawing out their neighbors. Soon, pleasantries turned into conversations. The boys joined a tennis club in Napa, where they have since made new friends, and Giacamo discovered a love of gardening after cultivating a veggie patch at Avant Garden on First Street.

Despite all that has happened, Benicia has finally begun to feel like home for the Italians. They are busy putting the final touches on the bistro, which has experienced its own share of setbacks, with construction delays and ventilation issues. While a date hasn't been set for the grand opening, Biatta and Giovanazzi can't wait to introduce authentic flavors of Italy to the community, including the art of *aperitivo*—predinner drinks and noshes designed to bring people together over good food and conversation.

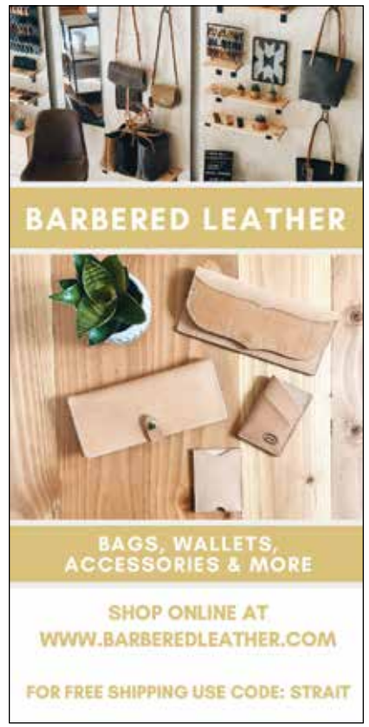
The casual neighborhood spot will serve classic dishes found throughout Italy, using the freshest ingredients available. There won't be a set menu, because Biatta doesn't want to serve something if the ingredients aren't the best, but he plans to regularly offer cheeses, olive oils, cured meats, and more delectable eats imported directly from Italy. (Passersby can also pick up these specialty products in the bistro's adjacent market.)

All in all, the Italians are excited for the chance to share their love and passion for food with new friends and neighbors.

"People in this community want to have a nice place where they can have authentic food, and they tell us every time they see us," says Giovanazzi.

"I love the people, the space, the community," adds Biatta. "We love everything about this place." *145 E D St., Benicia, amorebistrot.com* •


Biatta prepares an espresso.



Clockwise from left: Owner Leigh Warner; a fully loaded Philly cheesesteak; a classic pepperoni pizza.

Pizza Artist

LEIGH WARNER SERVES UP CHEESY, NEW YORK–STYLE GOODNESS AT SLICE OF ITALEIGH.

BY CASEY CANTRELL // PHOTOS BY BOB SCHNELL

Leigh Warner sees pizza differently.

Where others see dough slathered in tomato sauce and cheese, the owner of Slice of Italeigh in Martinez sees music. Like a guitarist riffing in the studio, Warner is always experimenting—tinkering with the ingredients, messing around with the cheese and sauce, improvising with a unique flourish or two. Sometimes, she plays the classics—margherita, pesto chicken, the Wai-ki-leigh (aka Hawaiian pizza). Other times, she comes up with new, unexpected hits—banh mi pizza, anyone?

"I'm an artist. I'm creative. I get bored easily," says Warner, who is also a musician and songwriter. "It sounds bad, but it keeps me going, keeps me thriving. I like to make people go, 'Damn, that's good.' "

From working in a bar kitchen to running a food truck to opening her own brick-and-mortar, Warner is a modern-day success story—and for good reason. Her homemade, New York–style pizzas are big on portions and flavor, with savory deliciousness in every bite.

"I just gravitated to [New York–style pizza]," she says. "I loved the history of it. It's very simplistic, but so good when you get it right."

The journey to successful restaurant hasn't been easy, though. She spent more than a decade perfecting her pizza recipes ("my friends and family loved it; they got to eat all the experiments"). In 2015, she answered a Craigslist ad for a cooking position at a Concord bar only to be unexpectedly let go two months later. At the urging of her girlfriend at the time ("she saw this movie called *Chef*"), Warner decided to buy an old 20-foot trailer that she renovated into a working food truck. And as she built up her business, she continued to tinker—bacon mac-and-cheese balls, Philly cheesesteaks.

Finally, in 2019, she took a leap and opened the doors to a brick-and-mortar location.

"I was scared s—tless, because it was bigger than anything I'd done before," says Warner. "I knew I'd be okay, though, because I'd done this for four years."

Her intuition proved more correct than even she expected. When the restaurant opened, "people were coming in droves," she says. "We had lines out the door. The city of Martinez just welcomed me."

And one thing's for sure: She misses her customers.

"Hopefully we can get back to meeting with our friends and having drinks and watching the games," she says. "[Martizians] continue to support me. I've never felt so loved." *621 Las Juntas St., Martinez, sliceofitaleigh.com* •

CARQUINEZ PIZZA PARTY

CRAVING SOME LOCAL 'ZA CLOSE TO HOME? WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED.

FOUR CORNERS PIZZA-N-PASTA
Serving up massive slices and authentic Italian flavors, Four Corners is sure to have your family singing "that's amore!" *628 Second Ave., Ste. 208, Crockett, (510) 787-7203*

WARRIOR NEW YORK PIZZA
Opened in 2017, Warrior has quickly become a local favorite thanks to its downright delicious thin-crust pizzas. *687 Parker Ave., Rodeo, warriornypizzaonline.com*

VALLEJO PIZZA
Family owned and operated, this longtime pizza parlor mixes it up with classic pies and delicious modern takes. (Chicken tikka pizza? Yum!) *3720 Sonoma Blvd., Vallejo, (707) 980-7725*

DINING & DRINKING GUIDE

STUCK ON WHERE TO ORDER YOUR NEXT MEAL? CHECK OUT THESE PROFILES OF SOME OF THE AREA'S TASTIEST RESTAURANTS.

$ = $10 AND UNDER | $$ = $11–$30 | $$$ = $30 AND OVER

BENICIA

LUCCA BAR & GRILL
Benicia's local bar and grill has a friendly atmosphere, great food, and refreshing drinks. Offering a seasonal beer garden with live music Thursday through Sunday, Lucca has set the standard for local entertainment.
439 First St.
(707) 745-3749
luccabarbenicia.com
luccabarandgrill
$$

PEARL THAI CUISINE
Discover authentic flavors at this homey restaurant.
870 Southampton Rd.
(707) 747-9777
pearlthaicuisine.com
pearlthaicuisine benicia
pearlthaicuisine
$$

BENICIA

ROOKIES SPORTS BAR & GRILL
Your favorite local hangout in downtown Benicia serves up modern American fare with a twist. Our bar features 32 rotating craft beers, wine, and specialty cocktails. Orders are available for take-out. Hours subject to change. Mon.–Thurs.: 4–9 p.m.; Fri.–Sun.: 1–9 p.m.; happy hour: Mon.–Fri., 4–9 p.m.
321 First St. | *(707) 746-7665*
rookiesbenicia.com
rookiesbenicia
$$

CROCKETT/ PORT COSTA

JUDY'S PLACE
This small Salvadorean eatery tucked away in Crockett packs a big punch, delivering fresh ingredients with Latin flare.
1207 Pomona St.
(510) 787-7768
judysplace crockett
$$

THE HONEY HOUSE CAFE
Located inside the Burlington Hotel, this spacious, bright cafe offers a simple menu and a beautiful, sunny place to relax. The coffee is superstrong.
2 Canyon Lake Dr.
(510) 787-6795
thehotelburlington.com
thehotelburlington
honeyhousecafe
$$

MARTINEZ

HOMAGE
The lunchtime eatery pairs age-old cooking techniques with locally sourced ingredients to create incredible dishes.
712 Main St.
(925) 957-9063
homagemartinez.com
homagemartinez
$$

LA PRIMAVERA
For 30-plus years, this hole-in-the-wall has been serving up authentic Mexican dishes in a welcoming environment.
1311 Pine St., Ste. I
(925) 229-2199
laprimaverarestaurant.com
laprimavera restaurant
$$

VALLEJO

MICHAEL WARRING
Michelin-caliber fare minus the price tag and the zip code. Chef Michael Warring serves an artfully crafted, seasonal six-course prix fixe that will have you rethinking fine dining. By reservation only.
8300 Bennington Dr.
(707) 655-4808
michaelwarring.com
michaelwarring
$$$

RUTHIE'S CARIBBEAN KITCHEN
Classic Caribbean dishes—including tender strip steak with veggies and spicy jerk chicken wings—are the star at this stylish modern restaurant.
2632 Sonoma Blvd.
(707) 731-0452
ruthiescaribbeankitchen.business.site
ruthiescaribbeankitchen
$$

MARTINEZ

VIC'S
Our family-owned and -operated restaurant provides an unforgettable dining experience, from our warm welcome to the care in the food we serve and sincerity in our service. We create food and togetherness. Vic's will have a special place in your heart! Open for takeout.
Tues.–Fri.: 8 a.m.–3 p.m.; Sat.–Sun.: 9 a.m.–2 p.m.
1500 Pacheco Blvd. | *(925) 387-0886*
vicsmartinezca | **vics_martinez**
$$

COURTESY OF ROOKIES SPORTS BAR & GRILL

LEFT TO RIGHT: COURTESY OF VIC'S; COURTESY OF ROOKIES SPORTS BAR & GRILL

Enjoy chicken wings and a cold beer at Rookies Sports Bar & Grill.

Fried Chicken Craze

NOTHING HITS THE SPOT BETTER THAN SAVORY FRIED CHICKEN, AND NO ONE MAKES IT BETTER THAN THESE CARQUINEZ RESTAURANTS.

BY CASEY CANTRELL

Going strong for 50 years, **House of Soul** in Vallejo offers the best of Southern cuisine. You can't go wrong with any of the soul food staples—including ribs, collard greens, and more—but the fried chicken is perfection. Crunchy on the outside, juicy on the inside, every bite will have you asking for more. *houseofsoul.top-cafes.com*

Crockett's **Bull Valley Roadhouse** gives classic fried chicken a fine dining makeover. Whether it's a sandwich stacked high with deliciousness or a 10-piece medley served with house pickles and pepper jam, one thing is for sure—you won't leave hungry. *bullvalleyroadhouse.com*

Get your fried chicken fix at Benicia's **Rookies Sports Bar & Grill**. The bar features a rotating tap of 32 craft brews to pair with classic fried chicken wings doused in buffalo, BBQ, or "Sweet Heat" sauce. You can take your meal to go or grab a socially distanced seat on the new outdoor patio. *rookiesbenicia.com*

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