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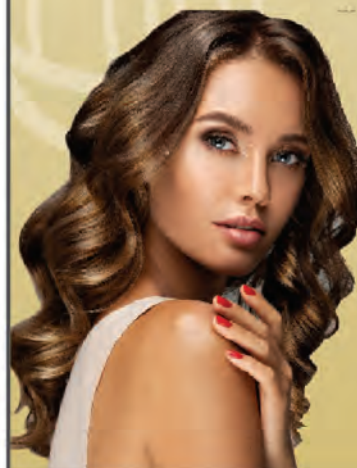
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FEATURES

GRAND MARSHAL - Paul Parreira Sr......7

MAIN ACTS.....8

PARADE.....9

FAIR FOOD..... 10

LIVESTOCK..... 12

RIDES..... 17

LITTLE HANDS..... 27

TRACTORS 29

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After all that rainy weather, the 131st Spring Fair is here!

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

Having endured a winter filled with atmospheric rivers, rising waters and cold temperatures, people across the San Joaquin Valley might be wondering if Spring will ever arrive.

They can stop wondering. Spring has sprung – welcomed in with the 2023 Merced County Spring Fair.

The 131st edition of the Spring Fair runs from Wednesday, May 3, through Sunday, May 7.

It will feature music, entertainment, the ever-popular demolition derby, livestock exhibits, all the fair food favorites and good, old-fashioned friendly competition for those who do fine arts, bake cookies, craft “barn quilts,” snap memorable photographs or even paint rocks.

At the gate, tickets cost \$15 for adults and \$5 for children. Thousands of students from all over Merced County – and a few from nearby communities in other counties -- will attend the Fair free through the School Tour Program, which includes hands-on educational experiences.

There are literally dozens of competitions for everything from the best cupcakes to quilts to paintings. More important than prize money are the bragging rights that come with a blue ribbon.

The real prizes are to be found during the small- and large-animal livestock auctions conducted through Saturday. In 2018, the Spring Fair was one of the first of the state’s 78 county fairs to surpass \$1 million in its annual livestock auction. The money went to the community’s young people, who often use it to pay some college expenses. For others, it provides seed money for starting their own herds.

Fair planning is a year-round endeavor, and the events begin well before opening day, with the annual Spring Fair Dinner at the O’Banion Building. The annual May Day Parade will be Saturday, May 6, followed that night by a performance of The Outlaw Mariachi.

The Spring Fair’s roots date back to the early 1890s, when land baron Henry Miller – one of the wealthiest men in America -- decided to host a “May Day Picnic” for his hundreds of employees. He supplied the food and drink, some of it brought all the way from San Francisco on the railroad that Miller had enticed into Los Banos.

After Miller passed in 1916, the Los Banos Chamber of Commerce took over. Now, Merced County sponsors it, under the oversight of Fair Manager Guy Gary and Fair Coordinator Jessica Ortega.

Organizers expect up to 80,000 visitors to arrive at Fourth and F streets over the five-day event.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced cancellation of the Spring Fair in 2020 and 2021. But last year, it came roaring back. This year’s Fair could be the largest yet, say organizers.



Gene Lieb/The Express

LEFT: The Merced County Spring Fair in Los Banos is all about agriculture and learning where our food comes from. A 4H member answers a judge’s question while showing her lamb in 2022; BOTTOM: The Merced County Spring Fair in Los Banos began in the early 1890’s when Henry Miller hosted a “May Day Picnic” for his employees.



Parreira grew up going to the Fair, now he's the Grand Marshal

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

Paul Parreira Sr. could walk the grounds of the Merced County Spring Fair blindfolded.

That's because he's been attending the Spring Fair – in its 131st year – since before he can remember.

“Honestly, I don't remember,” Parreira said when asked about his first Spring Fair. “I've got older sibs who were exhibiting at the fair, so I would guess it was by the time I was 3 or 4. Maybe younger.”

In the ensuing years, Parreira has been active at every level, from showing livestock, to creating exhibits, to booking entertainment. More recently, he has been instrumental in raising funds for fairgrounds improvements, funding scholarships and providing prize money for exhibitors.

If anything has needed doing, Parreira has often been the person asked to get it done.

That's why Parreira was chosen to be Grand Marshal of the 131st Merced County Spring Fair Parade, which will be Saturday, May 6, in Los Banos. The Fair runs from May 3 to May 7.

Being Grand Marshal is the easiest job he's ever had.

“I've never not worked during Fair week,” said Parreira, 65. “So it's going to be different, not having a job to do and being able to relax and enjoy it like the rest of the patrons.”

One of Parreira's most significant contributions has been his role in establishing the Spring Fair Heritage Foundation, which raises in excess of \$200,000 each year. But that is hardly his only contribution.

In his 26 years on the Fair Board, Parreira has been involved in booking entertainment and concession vendors – so you can blame him for the cinnamon bombs, Suicide Sandwiches and funnel



Grand Marshal Paul Parreira.

cakes. He has worked closely with Butler Amusements — which has facilities in Santa Nella — to bring in some of the best midway rides in America. And Parreira's pride in the quality of the Fair's livestock exhibits is profound.

“I'd definitely put our livestock quality up against any county fair in the state,” said Parreira. “Because of that, we've been able to attract judges from all over the U.S. for different species.”

Parreira's dedication to the Spring Fair might be genetic. His family has been involved since before he was born. His parents – Barbara and Louie – created the annual Little Hands on the Farm interactive exhibit 20 years ago, which is why it will be named in their honor this year.

By the time Paul was in third grade, he was showing hogs. As an adult, with his own kids showing animals, he was volunteering in the livestock area. That led to an appointment to the Fair Board, and the rest is history. It's a history that extends beyond the fairgrounds.

Parreira helped set up an irrigation system so that the fairgrounds could stop using treated city water. He was involved in turning an underdeveloped area of the



Gene Lieb/The Express

Paul Parreira hugs Patti Parreira-Alberti as he congratulates her on her retirement as the fair office manager during the opening ceremony of the first day of the Merced County Spring Fair in 2018.

fairgrounds into lighted city ballparks.

When he's not working to make the Fair better, Parreira is active in the Knights of Columbus, chairs a Political Action Committee, sits on two state boards, works with the FFA and 4-H. And he farms.

“It's how we were raised,” said Parreira, deflecting the credit toward his parents. “It's important to give back to the community when the community has given so much to you.”

“Working at the Fair is an opportunity to give back,” said Parreira. “It's an opportunity to work with some really great people – really great people. And it's an opportunity to help spotlight the agriculture that is produced in this area and that contributes to the success of our community and to our county.”

“And how can you not want to be involved in the greatest youth activity in the nation – raising livestock?” asked

Parreira.

He ranks the dedication of the Veterans Memorial Wall among his proudest Fair accomplishments, but there are others.

“To be part of starting the Merced County Spring Fair Heritage Foundation, that's a big one,” said Parreira. “Ron and I developed it, but we had an awful lot of help in that. I still sit on the board, and we think it's really important. It helps support Little Hands, the Henry Miller Farm, the Livestock Awards and all of our scholarships. It also supports the still exhibits – arts, home ec. And none of the Foundation money is used for operational expenses.”

Parreira is too young to retire and recognizes that there will always be another project, another task that can make the Fair better.

“I haven't flipped burgers or poured beer yet,” Parreira laughed. “But maybe that's next.”

The Outlaw Mariachi will have lots of Bad Company on mainstage this year

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

Here in California, we all know what a mariachi band sounds like. And anyone familiar with country music for the past 30 years has heard the “outlaw” sound.

None of that will prepare you for The Outlaw Mariachi.

Think Los Lobos meets ZZ Top, singing Pink Floyd backed by the Chorale Dia de Muertos hosting a dance party. The six-, and sometimes seven-member band will be the featured entertainment Saturday night at the Merced County Spring Fair. The show is set for 7 p.m., but Fair manager Guy Gary suggests you find seats early, because this show is expected to pack the venue.

“They’re super high energy,” said booking agent Germane Smith of Mason Entertainment. “They’re just unique and fun and you can’t stay in your seat when they’re doing their show. They get the crowd engaged; it’s really hard not to sing or dance along with them.”

The Outlaw Mariachi brings trumpets, guitars, violins, sombreros, beards, braids, a skull motif and songs you’ve probably heard before, but never like this.

Their Spring Fair show, one of 200 booked this year, is sandwiched between dates in Fresno, Los Angeles, Yuma, AZ, and San Diego.

Mavero Duran helped form the band and often acts its spokesman. When he’s not talking or singing, he’s blowing a trumpet. Other band members come from as far away as New York and nearby as Fresno – including Wild Bill the guitar player, drummer Nico Stixx, Guitar Ron and Belle Martele on violin. Their former bands include the Mariachi Divas and Metalachi.

The front-man is lead vocalist Gun-

skull Rickey, who played in Metalachi with Mavero.

“The musicians were top notch,” Mavero told The Desert Review before an appearance at California Mid-Winter Fair in Imperial. All played in rock bands, but each brings something extra. Their repertoire spans Reggae, Flamenco, Latin Jazz, country and even a little classical.

“Basically, from the first day of practice we were like, ‘God bless this!’” said Mavero.

When they first started playing together, during COVID, The Outlaw Mariachi called themselves the Los Charros of Rock. One of their most popular pieces is the theme to “The Mandalorian” done in cumbia style. Another is Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall,” turning it into a dance tune.

Streamed versions of The Outlaw Mariachi and its predecessor Los Charros of Rock, can be found on the web, offering offer a hint of what this band delivers. Expect songs first recorded by Otis Redding, Queen, Charlie Daniels, Santana and Jimi Hendrix. Don’t expect to hear them the way you remember.

The Outlaw Mariachi filters music through metal, mariachi and even some country. The violin is as important as the guitars, and brass textures every song.

“We put a lot more of ourselves and truth into this project,” said Mavero.

As Gunsull Ricky told Voyage LA Magazine, “We are very proud of the group of people this ensemble is made up of; professional, music-loving individuals that just come together with one goal -- to unite people who hear them play with not only good music but humor and positive vibes. There’s no one else out there like The Outlaw Mariachi.”



The Outlaw Mariachi

Fair manager Gary warned folks to check any preconceived notions at the gate. “Everybody thinks it’s like mariachi, then they go into other things. It’s just different, something outside the norm.”

Audiences invariably respond, said Smith. “They’re one of the most popular bands we have. They’re definitely fair favorites.”

Along with The Outlaw Mariachi there will be three tribute bands performing during the week with the Banda Rancho Viejo closing the Fair on Sunday.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. “Take A Little Ride” with the Flat Busted Band for a Jason Aldean tribute show that has been playing the casino circuit, festivals and other Northern California venues. One of those shows was in March at the Mainzer Theatre in Merced. Front man Brian McPherson covers songs from several of Aldean’s 11 albums, including “My Kinda Party,” which went quadruple platinum. Like all mainstage shows, admission is included in the Fair ticket.

THURSDAY NIGHT. Bad Jovi features the music of two legendary rock bands, Bad Company and Bon Jovi. Expect to hear classic such as “Living on a Prayer,” “Bad Medicine,” “Dead or Alive” and “Rock & Roll Fantasy.” The six-member band plays dozens of dates each year throughout Northern California, from fairs to festivals to wineries.

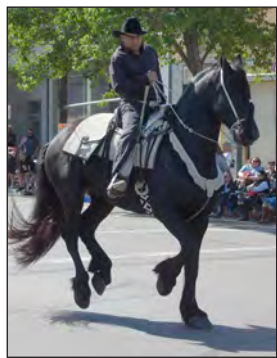
FRIDAY NIGHT. Bad Miller Revival will have fairgoers singing along songs made famous by Bad Company and the Steve Miller Band in the 1970s and ‘80s. The band features songs like “Jet Airliner,” “Fly Like an Eagle” and “Space Cowboy” from the Steve Miller Band and “Shooting Star,” “How About That” and “Feel Like Making Love” from Bad Company.

SUNDAY NIGHT. The Banda Rancho Viejo brings their full ensemble to the mainstage, including trombones, clarinets, trumpets, guitars, congas and a tuba. It was formed in 2006 by a father-and-son duo, inspired by their hometown of El Limon de los Peraza, Sinaloa. They’ve been recording since 2007 and playing in U.S. frequently – which explains the titles of some of their most popular songs, such as “Mi My Beloved Girl” and “On My Knees, I Ask You.” The Banda Rancho has been nominated for a Latin Grammy for Best Banda Music Album in 2012.

Following each of the nightly shows, Chris Mabry, the Master of Comedy Hypnosis, will take the stage. He has been performing at the Spring Fair since at least 2018. Mabry has done shows throughout California, including at Six Flags and the Comedy Club in Los Angeles. His show is entirely improvisational and is never the same from night to night.

Hometown pride makes May Day Parade a major event in Los Banos

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF



Gene Lieb/The Express

LEFT: One of many horses perform for the audience during the 2022 parade; RIGHT: The Dos Palos High School marching band performs at the 2022 parade in Downtown Los Banos.

This year's theme is "Barn in the USA," a patriotic play on the title of a Bruce Springsteen song from 1984.

To encourage participation, there are numerous prizes available, ranging from \$10 to \$150 for the best community float.

The May Day Parade is not the oldest in California – that honor belongs to the Dixon May Fair Parade, which started in 1875. And it's not the most elaborate; the New Year's Day Rose Parade in Pasadena gets that designation.

But the May Day Parade is no slacker. In

the past, it was often compared favorably to the Rose Parade for the number of entrants, costumes, music and enthusiasm on display. In the 1930s, there were actually three parades during the day to accommodate all the entrants.

Judges will choose winners of four special categories. The Fair Board Award will go to the best group entry for those age 18 and over. The President's Trophy will be presented to the best individual entry, while the Mayor's Trophy goes to the outstanding entrant from the city of Los Banos. There's

also a special award for the best entrant that includes horses – the Horse Division Sweepstakes Trophy.

The parade is sponsored by the Merced County Spring Fair board of directors with cooperation from the Los Banos Parlor No. 206 of Native Sons.

Throughout the 1890s and early 1900s, Miller attended every parade and showed enormous pride in the community that he had a huge hand in creating. That tradition continues today.

Good luck to all 2023 exhibitors!



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Have Fun at the Fair!

Food is absolutely part of fun at the Spring Fair every year

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

nos Chamber of Commerce's beer booth.

It's fair to say, food is one of the main attractions at the Fair.

While thousands of people eagerly await their favorite Fair foods, many vendors are waiting just as eagerly for the Fair to begin.

Former Fair Board Chairman Paul Perreira said the fair is so popular with vendors, that it is extremely rare for one to give up a spot. "A number of the stands actually have changed ownership," he said, "and part of the deal in buying it was that the new owner checked with us to make sure they could hold their spot."

According to Ortega, the most popular vendor every year is the Old West Cinnamon rolls stand, from which wafts the most enticing aroma known to any fair-goer anywhere. But they're not just cinnamon rolls. You can get them topped with cherries, chocolate or even bacon.

The rolls are so popular that even during the two years when COVID-19 canceled the fair, vendors came to the fairgrounds so that customers could get their treats.

It's not exactly the most appetizing of names for a meal: The Suicide Sandwich.

But the temptation of all that tender tri-tip served up on butter-infused toasted bread is enough to have thousands of people tempting fate at the Merced County Spring Fair every year. The Suicide Sandwich is one of the most popular items at the Fair each year, says Fair Coordinator Jessica Ortega.

It is the proud creation of the Los Banos Abattoir Co. and just one of many, uh, delicacies that can be found at the Fair.

More than two dozen food vendors will be offering everything from kettle corn to corn dogs to hot dogs. You can get pretzels with mustard or cheese or multiple other toppings. There's ice cream, cotton candy, churros and Dippin' Dots. There is Mexican Food, Chinese Food, fried chicken and pizza. Variations are virtually endless at the Spring Fair, from May 3-7. And that doesn't count the stands that sell beverages, including the Los Ba-



One of the busiest food booths at the Merced County Spring Fair is the cinnamon rolls booth.



For those who enjoy a cold beer, the Los Banos Chamber of Commerce beer booth can take care of you.



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Junior livestock auction one of the most successful in the Valley

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

Every year, the livestock competition and auction are among the highlights of the Merced County Spring Fair. It's always been that way.

But what makes it that way? It's a lot of things.

Start with good animals, well cared for by dedicated students. Young people from all around Los Banos – from Dos Palos to Gustine to Hilmar – prepare their animals for this fair.

Then there is quality judging, by people considered true experts on their species.

Excellent facilities, with solid pens and up-to-date barns connected by good connections to the show rings are essential.

Finally, there's the bidding that follows. Being the first fair of the season, the Merced County Spring Fair sets bar for all the fairs to follow, and those involved make sure that students are rewarded for their efforts.

Those are all important, says Paul Parreira, a member of the Fair's Heritage Foundation and 26-year member of the Spring Fair Board. But the most important ingredient is less tangible.

"We have phenomenal support," said Parreira. "That's the main reason the auctions are so good. The support not only from businesses, but from individuals who come out for the small-animal sale then again on Saturday for the large livestock auction."

In this case, "support" translates into dollars. In 2018, the Spring Fair auction broke \$1 million.

"We rang the bell, as they say, on that one," said Parreira. "It was a pretty good party after that one."

It was a memorable moment for Merced County Supervisor Scott Silveira, a former Fair Board member and auctioneer at the Fair each year. "I've been part of a \$1 million sale at the fair. ... For our community, that's a big deal."

For context, the Big Fresno Fair livestock auction didn't break \$1 million until a year later, with around 820 animal lots. The Merced County Spring Fair usually has around 420 animal lots.

There's yet another secret ingredient for the Spring Fair's success: Tradition.

"It's been here 100-plus years," said

Silveira. "My son and daughter are the fourth generation who have showed here. My papa showed at the Fair. My mother showed at the Fair. I showed and my wife showed there, too. And it's always been that way."

"Around here, May Day Fair -- as a kid, this fair is what you look forward to once you got past Christmas," said Silveira. "You think about the generations that have all experienced this fair, and you continue to see that passion. It's special."

Pat Gallichio sees the same thing: "I've been in ag all my life. And I love to see these kids grow. You see it across generations. I'm old enough to remember when their parents showed; I might have even showed with their grandparents."

"I know we're doing something right."

The barns will open on Sunday, April 30 for feed, tack and bedding. On Monday, the animals will begin to arrive and weigh-ins will begin. Judging starts Tuesday for Dairy Showmanship. On Wednesday, judging begins in earnest in categories, and the Grand Drive starts at 6 p.m. in the Arburua Arena.

On Thursday, judging continues with the Pee Wee Showmanship competition at 3 p.m. and the Replacement Heifer Sale at 6. On Friday, the small-animal weigh-ins and judging takes place, followed by the Master Showmanship competition at 5 p.m.

On Saturday, the Junior Livestock Auction begins at 10 a.m.



Gene Lieb/The Express

TOP: A 4H goat chapter poses for a photo with the judge after winning first place in 2022; **ABOVE:** An FFA student sells her animal during the junior livestock sale at the Merced County Spring Fair in 2022; **LEFT:** It's all business for this 4H student showing his pig at the fair in 2022 (photo contributed).



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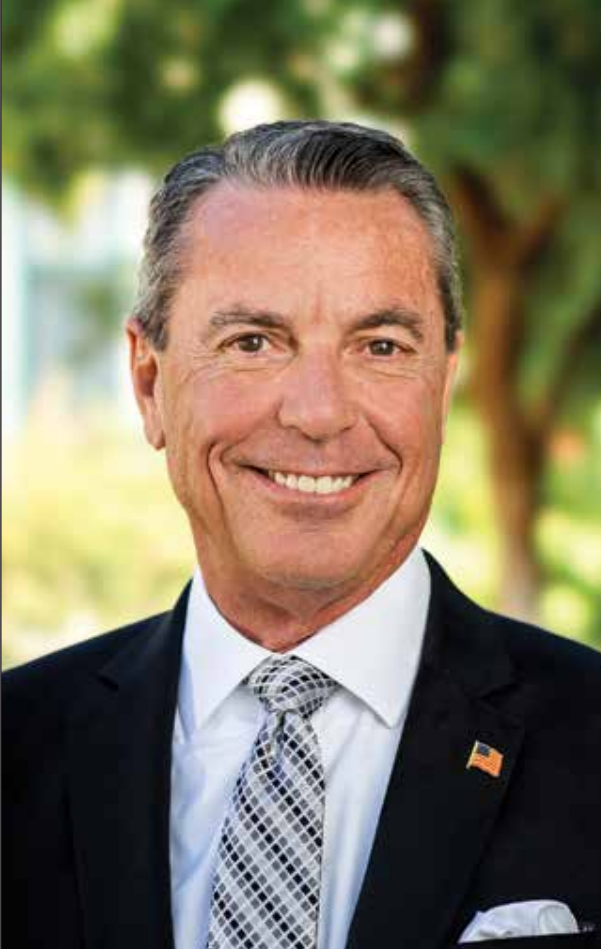
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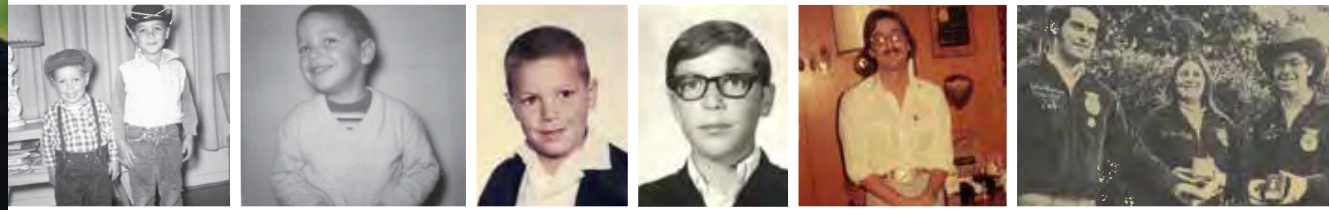
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Zillerator and Century Wheel are among special rides at Spring Fair

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

Not every county fair gets a roller coaster on its carnival midway. But the **Zillerator** – with its breath-taking 50-foot drops -- will be a centerpiece of thrills for intrepid riders at the Merced County Spring Fair in Los Banos, May 3-7.

Part of what makes the Spring Fair special is its close relationship with Butler Amusements, which has been providing the Fair's midway rides since 1987 – some 33 years, interrupted only by COVID-19.

The company's ride and fleet maintenance facility is based in Santa Nella, just a few miles from the Fairgrounds. Many of Butler's 15 permanent employees at the facility and 100 seasonal staff live in or near Los Banos. Butch Butler, the founder of Butler Amusements, was the May Day Parade Grand Marshal in 2010, a year before his death.

So yes, there is a special relationship between Butler Amusements

and the Spring Fair.

"It's a favorite of ours," said Andrea Stillwell, Butler's marketing director. "A lot of the Butler family actually lives in or near Los Banos, so we provide a lot of complimentary tickets to family members who hand them out to friends."

Since its inception in 1970, Butler Amusements has become the largest carnival-ride contractor on the West Coast, providing rides, carnival games and food booths to nearly 40 county fairs and 100 similar events each year.

Rides range from mild, such as the Jumpin' Jungle Funhouse, to wild – like the Ring of Fire, which climbs to a peak before intrepid riders go backwards down the incline.

Among teenagers, The Zipper – which Stillwell describes as an "upside down, spinny ride" – attracts long lines every year.

For those who prefer more visual than physical thrills, the Century Wheel will carry its six-passenger

gondolas 75 feet into the air for spectacular views of the surrounding area – all the way to Santa Nella on a clear day.

Usually, Butler's crews arrive at a site three days in advance to start putting together the dazzling light displays and various rides. In Los Banos, where the commute is a lot shorter, they'll arrive a day early because the Zillerator requires an extra day of preparation.

Butler Amusements – which calls itself the "Cleanest Show in the West" – also has offices in Fairfield and Oregon. Carried by a fleet of dozens of trucks, it operates in carnival midways from Washington to Idaho to Arizona and throughout the Central Valley – including the Big Fresno Fair and the California State Fair. Butler Amusements can provide rides for six events simultaneously.

Tickets for midway rides and games are not included in the prices of admission, but a wristband can be purchased for \$30.



Gene Lieb/The Express

Riders of the Zillerator come to the end of the ride following the 50-foot-drops; For those who like to fly high into the sky, the airplanes are a good choice; For the less adventurous, there is always the carousel.



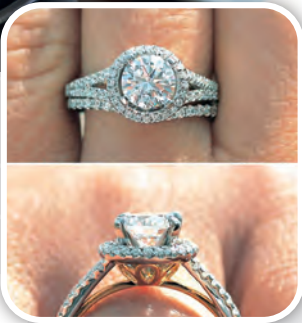
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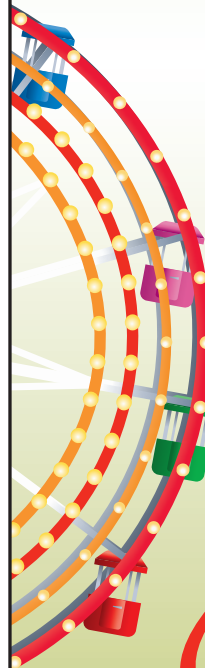


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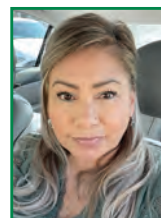
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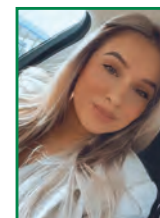
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WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

Up to 80,000 people are expected to attend the Merced County Spring Fair this year, meaning there will probably be over 16,000 on hand for each day of its five-day run, May 3-7.

That's comparable to the population of Delhi and Livingston combined, all squeezed into the fairgrounds at F and Fourth streets in Los Banos. Having so many people together at one time offers some security challenges – from traffic control to settling disagreements to finding lost parents.

That's why roughly 30 deputies will be patrolling the fairgrounds each day (and night) of the Fair.

"We want everyone to feel safe here," said Fair Coordinator Jessica Ortega. "If you see what you think is a potential problem, then notify the sheriff. And the sheriff's deputies will be really quick to act on it."

This year, security inside the Fairgrounds will be coordinated by Deputy Kevin Blake. He and his staff will be working closely with Los Banos police officers controlling traffic and patrolling areas outside the fairgrounds. Probation Department officers will also provide support.

"We have a ton of personnel who sign up to attend these events," said Sheriff's Office public information officer Alexandra Britton, so there's never a shortage of security."

"It's the safest place in Merced County that week," said

former Fair Board President Paul Parreira and this year's May Day Parade Grand Marshal. "Long before he was Sheriff, Vern Warnke was a deputy, and he oversaw security for the fairgrounds. ... So, Vern is usually there every night, too."

Said Britton, "He likes the fair. But I can't say what nights the sheriff's coming."

Law enforcement's most important role is keeping those attending the Fair safe. But there are always lighter moments.

"The fun part of our job is speaking with community members, getting to pass out stickers, answering people's questions – all that good stuff," said Britton.

If there is an emergency, extensive training will kick in.

In 2019, the Gilroy Garlic Festival – one of California's oldest food-based fairgrounds events – was rocked by a shooting that killed three and wounded 17. Since then, those providing security for large-scale events train and plan for any kind of "active shooter" response.

"We don't expect anything like that to happen," said Britton, "but we are prepared for it. That's why we have so many of our personnel out there. We want to keep it a family-friendly event."

Britton had some advice for specific groups of fairgoers.

Families: "Pay attention to where your kids are. Kids get excited and they go off to look at something exciting, and it's easy to misplace them. That's something we end



Gene Lieb/The Express

Merced County Sheriff Officers help keep the fair safe for the entire week.

up doing quite a bit – reuniting parents and their kids." Parents should consider attending during the day, when crowds are smaller and it's easier to keep track of small children.

Teenagers: "Enjoy yourself and have fun. But be safe about it," said Britton. It's no fun getting hurt or being escorted to the gate.

Gang members: "We're not going to tolerate any foolishness."

As always, those involved in security say that if you're planning to drink alcoholic beverages then you should have an alternate plan for getting home – such as a designated driver.



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Her vision has provided enduring images of the Spring Fair for years

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

Art is a visual medium. But for artist Katherine Crinklaw, it's the words that inspire the imagery.

Crinklaw has provided the defining images of the Merced County Spring Fair for the past 30 years. This year's painting, based on the theme "Barn in the USA," was no different.

"I work off the words," Crinklaw said. "Once they give me the theme, I think, 'What do the words mean?' How can I relate those words to the county fair? I'm already inspired by the fair, so then it's just a matter of how I illustrate those words."

Dreamed up by Los Banos High School junior Madison Jasso, this year's theme -- "Barn in the USA" -- evoked a lot of emotion for Crinklaw.

"'Barn in the USA' didn't mean just a barn -- it meant caring for the landscape, it meant farming, it meant sustainability," said Crinklaw. "County fairs represent their counties, family values, small towns -- all those things I admire so much," said Crinklaw, whose painting shows a red barn on a green field.

"The barn is not that large. You see the foothills in the background, this amazing sky, and a tiny American flag. I was trying to show agriculture in all its glory. I was trying to glorify the land, the atmosphere of farming and the barn -- which is so California, so American."

Crinklaw is a thriving professional artist, who works from a gallery in her hometown of Gustine. At any given time, she has dozens of commissions from paying customers and charitable causes. She realized years ago that she had more projects to consider than time to devote.

This year, her husband, Michael, required major surgery and her priorities came sharply into focus. So, after 30 years of helping define how people perceive the Spring Fair, Crinklaw told the Fair Board this would be her last painting.

"When I met the fair manager (Guy Gary), I told him it was not an easy decision for me. It was emotional," said Crinklaw. "I feel very sad about stopping, but I've given them 30 paintings. And my gallery is a lot to manage. ... I just really feel like, you have to know when it's time."

Stepping aside, says Crinklaw, provides the Fair with an opportunity.

"I'm hoping the Fair Board and the Heritage Foundation won't see this as an ending," she said. "I actually believe my stepping aside and letting them have the Fair art come from somewhere else, will breathe new life into that part of it. It will engage the community and young art students as well. There is a wealth



Copyright photo courtesy of Katherine Crinklaw

After 30 years of creating paintings depicting the themes of the Merced County Spring Fair, artist Katherine Crinklaw's "Barn in the USA" painting will be her last for the Merced County Spring Fair.

of talent in Los Banos and Dos Palos."

Crinklaw did her first Fair painting at the request of Diane Neves, Katherine's sister and then a fair board member.

Four years ago, Crinklaw told the Fair Board that she had completed her last painting, but the tragic death of her brother, John Menezes, intervened.

"There was such an outpouring from the fair community, the fair board was so kind, that I stayed to stay on. I wanted to honor brother and go on a little further," said Crinklaw.

"She's just fantastic. But she's really popular and

really busy," said Fair Board President Natasha Crivelli. "She is the kindest person in the world. And one of the most humble. She won't even come when we auction her art off. ... We're sad, but we understand."

"It's sad we're losing her," said Fair Board member Pat Gallichio. "But that family -- the kids have all showed, they've always been really involved. We knew this time would come. "

So did Crinklaw. But she's glad her last painting will be one of her favorites. As she put it: "I'm so grateful to have this magnificent subject for my last painting because it encompasses all of the past fairs."

Violin on Fire will feature some very hot music

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

Don't bother looking for any smoke from burning fiddles at the Merced County Spring Fair, May 3-7. When Patrick Contreras does his "Violin on Fire" show, the flames are more metaphorical than actual.

But that doesn't mean the music isn't hot.

Contreras' violin virtuosity has been called "spellbinding" as he moves through the audience playing songs ranging from Santana to Michael Jackson, from Jimi Hendrix to Gloria Estefan. Contreras has toured with shows in Europe and also performed in Africa. But from Wednesday through Sunday, he'll be in Los Banos.

Contreras grew up in Fresno in a neighborhood he describes as "pretty tough." He learned to play music that appealed to family and neighbors who weren't going to be attending the Fresno Youth Symphony or a performance of any school orchestra.

He has opened shows for BB King, Al Jarreau and The Wailers, which explains his hugely eclectic musical selections. Basically, he can play anything.

"He's one of our two most-requested acts," said Germane Smith of Mason Entertainment, a booking agency that handles most of the acts that will appear at the Fair this year.

The most-requested act is The Outlaw Mariachi, a six-member band that will play the grandstand on Saturday night at this year's Fair. Contreras has been known to join them onstage.

As usual with the Fair, there will be several performers roaming the grounds each day and evening. Among them is Chris Mabrey, an improvisational hypnotist who has been a Fair favorite for several years. While the hypnotics are fascinating to most who watch, it's the improv part that makes Mabrey's show special.

"But I work totally without a script," Mabrey explained, saying his show "100 percent improv show;

that's what makes it funny and different each time."

One of the Spring Fair favorites -- Jeremy the Juggler -- will return for his 13th year at the Fair. Jeremy Shafer doesn't just juggle, he weaves origami and a lot of comedy into his act, sometimes while sitting atop a unicycle.

For pure laughs, search the Fairgrounds for Skip Banks, the Fair's "Hollywood on Wheels Comedy Show." Banks has performed on the Late-Late Show, Penn & Teller's Fool Us and in hundreds of live venues. You'll see a host of characters from Elvis to Tina Turner to a costumed Pharaoh to the Little Country Kicker.

Also playing the grounds will be the All Alaskan Racing Pigs, who "compete" on a steeplechase course dressed in "silks" but sans jockeys.

Children attending the fair will delight in Kids Town America and fairgoers of all ages will enjoy Flo the Clown, who has been performing at Fairs and similar events for 25 years.



Gene Lieb/The Express

TOP: Pigs may not be able to fly, but the Alaskan Racing Pigs come pretty close as they jump over barriers to get their food; **BOTTOM:** Beside juggling, Jeremy the Juggler makes balloon animals for children. All you have to do is ask.

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Contests: Ribbons, cash prizes, bragging rights

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

Who will be the Queen of Cookies? The Prince of Pies? The Overwhelming Welder?

Those aren't official designations you will find in the Merced County Spring Fair Exhibitor's handbook, but those blue ribbons signify far more than just "First Place." Most come with a modest cash prize, courtesy of sponsors for each of the Fair's 9 categories. More importantly, are the bragging rights – including some that go back generations.

"There is a lady who enters almost every single contest -- and she wins just about every contest she enters," said contest coordinator Eileen Vaughn. "People come in and they've been doing it for 20 years because they love doing it. It is a source of pride for a lot of people; and a lot of them are very competitive."

Judging is serious business. As Vaughn noted, you wouldn't allow someone to judge craft beers just because they enjoy a Bud Light after softball practice.

In the food categories, one of the judges

is a professional caterer; another is a professional sausage-maker.

The companies and groups who sponsor the contest categories often recruit judges. Vaughn said she tries to keep their names as quiet as possible so they won't be bothered by hopeful contestants in the weeks leading up to the Fair.

What do the judges get?

"They get a handshake and a lot of thanks from me," Vaughn laughed. "And they get a ticket into the Fair for that day. But the judges take it seriously; they're people who want to share their expertise and help others as they learn. It's a small-town Fair, a family fair, so it's people from the community helping the community."

Contestants range from age 4 or 5 to late 70s. Entries in the most popular categories can fluctuate, but the cheesecake contest is always popular.

One crowd-pleaser every year is kids art, with Vaughn having taken in over 1,000 entries so far.

It's also one of the most popular with Fairgoers. "The kids love to come in and

show their parents and grandparents what they've done," said Vaughn. "It's always exciting to see kids running through the building excited to show it off."

One of the most complex and compelling contests every year is Ag Mechanics. Area high schools take it seriously, as do the many professionals in the region who "go out of their way to help out."

"We got some wonderful sponsors," said Vaughn, "and they provide scholarships for the winners. ... The kids compete by making projects, and not little projects – livestock trailers, barbecues, mechanized farm equipment, hay balers."

Judging takes place on all five days, May 3-7.

*Wednesday: Cheesecakes and Cupcakes
Thursday: Kids Cookies and "The Best-Ever Cookie Contest."
Friday: Nuts About Almonds.
Saturday: Pasta Sauce (with awards for both red and non-tomato), and Bacon Bites (savory and sweet).
Sunday: Salsa (tomato and non-tomato) and Homemade Sausage.*

For exact times of judging, see the Exhibitor Handbook on the Spring Fair website.



Gene Lieb/The Express

Michael Amabile, owner of España's South-west Bar and Grill and former mayor of Los Banos, judges the salsa contest in 2022.

See 'rednecks' crashing into each other?

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

The most popular show at the Merced County Spring Fair? That's easy: The Destruction Derby.

"People enjoy watching the cars crash into each other," said Herman Prock, who is this year's promoter for the Cinco de Mayo Smash on Saturday night. "Who doesn't enjoy seeing rednecks crashing their cars?"

Prock has been competing in demo derbies for the past 15 years and raced on circle tracks before that. His partner – Dale Nelson of Clovis – has been doing demo derbies for 25 years. Between them, they know what drivers and fans expect: Lots of crashing, lots of noise and lots of excitement.

The Fairgrounds grandstand seats roughly 2,500, and Fair officials expect most – if not all – of those seats to be filled for the show. A seat is included in the price of admission.

Prock, who used to volunteer to work at the Spring Fair before retiring from the Merced County Sheriff's Office, said he expects 20 or 25 cars but wouldn't be sur-

prised if 30 or more showed up. Some of those will be built by local competitors, but some will be hauled in from as far away as Fresno, Sacramento and perhaps even Nevada.

"You'll have your locals," said Prock. "But I've heard some big names will be there. There's a team, 8 or 9 people, they go by FBI, and they're projected to be there. I've heard Ryan Chivers might be here; he runs a big derby in Kansas – the biggest in the United States."

Prock hopes Andrew Ryan, who runs with Team FTL and produces the West Coast Demolition Derby podcast, will show as well.

The drivers will be competing for at least \$7,000 in prize money -- \$4,000 for the winner, \$1,500 for second and \$600 for third. There will also be a "Mad Dog Award" of \$1,000 for the most aggressive driver. And the pot could grow. Prock said he plans to put any excess beyond his expenses in the prize fund.

"We're trying to put the Los Banos Destruction Derby back on the map," he said. "And I'm just trying not to lose any money."



Gene Lieb/The Express

ABOVE: Two of the many derby cars compete in the 2022 destruction derby at the Merced County Spring Fair; LEFT: In between derby heats drivers and helpers make modifications to their cars with cutting torches to help them withstand the hits from opponents.

It takes an entire community to keep the Fair vibrant and viable

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

involved, not just the board,” said Gallichio.

“We had an awful lot of help when we started this thing,” said Paul Parreira, also part of that founding group. And they still do.

“We raise a couple hundred thousand a year, and it all stays right here for scholarships, youth and livestock,” said Parreira, this year’s May Day Parade Grand Marshal. “It also helps support Little Hands, the Henry Miller Farm, the livestock awards and the still exhibits. Absolutely none of the foundation money is used for operational expenses.”

Fund raising begins early each year with a dinner hosted by farmer Anthony Giannone.

“It’s a nice steak dinner just to thank the Heritage sponsors. It’s a kickoff for us,” said Gallichio. During the dinner, original art created by Katherine Crinklaw to commemorate the Fair is auctioned off, sometimes fetching up to \$5,000.

Then there’s the annual car show, which donates 75% of its proceeds to the

Foundation. Now, there’s also the Home-town Throwdown, a barbecue cookoff.

And this year, the Foundation will auction off the “Heritage Hog.”

Kerri Gomes donated the pig, Associated Feeds provided the feed and Cassius Gandy, an FFA member at Pacheco High, won the right to raise it. Cassius will get a \$1,000 scholarship, but the Foundation will get the proceeds when the hog is auctioned off.

Those destined to benefit from the Foundation’s efforts don’t mind helping when asked.

“The volunteer work the kids do for us is tremendous,” said Gallichio, “whether it’s the events we have – they do the centerpieces for our tables – or working during the Fair or on the fairgrounds. Anything we ask.”

For instance, when the Fair board needed to set a foundation, the FFA students came out and helped pour concrete. “They were here helping us the whole time.

“They volunteer for Little Hands and

the Henry Miller Farm -- for the Fair or the Heritage Foundation. They’ve even come out for some funerals. Whatever we need, all we have to do is call the FFA and 4-H, whether it’s in Los Banos or Dos Palos, they come.”

Organizing so many efforts takes patience, sweat and sheer effort, admitted Gallichio.

“Sure, there’s sweat and work involved,” said Gallichio. “But it’s a lot of fun, too. This is about the future of our industry.

“Demographics will tell you that in our town, we’ve gone from ag to being city people. So, we have to educate people. Ag is what feeds this world. ... It’s all to get these kids in ag and keep them involved. Hopefully, they’ll pursue ag. And if some don’t, that’s OK. Because if they’ve gone through the ag programs, exhibiting animals, they’re still bettering themselves and learning what it takes. And maybe, someday down the road, when they’re asked to help out, they’ll understand why.”



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Henry Miller would be proud to share the farming experience

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

see the relationship.”

Be careful where you step, she said: “When you see that sitting there, it’s not chocolate chips on the ground.”

The exhibit is spread across 7,200 square feet and offers more than just education. It also offers opportunities for dozens of volunteers to share their talents and their knowledge of farming in the great Central Valley.

One of the most important volunteers, said Lightsey, is Karen Ellington, who has been her friend since before she can remember. “I called her the year after my mom died, and I said I need help. She came the next day and she’s been here every year since.”

Also instrumental are volunteers from San Luis High School, students who help set up, clean up and lead tours for younger students.

“If it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t be able to pull this off,” said Lightsey, whose occupation is operating a non-profit program called Stable Living for people with various life challenges. She gets many of them involved, too.

“There’s not much we don’t do,” said Lightsey. “We have a woodshop, we have gardens where we teach them how to grow stuff, how to pick it and preserve it and then how to cook it. Henry Miller is

..... “ “

It is amazing how many people come in and they don’t understand the difference between a horse and a cow, or where milk comes from.

— Kat Lightsey



Gene Lieb/The Express

Los Banos Unified School District Superintendent, Dr. Mark Marshall, right, and children pet the animals in the Henry Miller petty zoo at the 2022 Merced County Spring Fair.

an example of that – thinking totally out of the box.”

The exhibit’s purpose is to teach visitors the responsibilities and challenges found on the farm.

“This year the theme is ‘Barn in the USA,’” said Lightsey. “We tell them why a barn is red, the kind of things you’ll find inside it. People forget that they’re not all just party barns.”

And farming life isn’t always a party. Lightsey, 54, is dealing with a form of brain cancer. “Seven or eight years ago, I was told that I had a couple of weeks to live. I was ready to go, but God had other things for me to do.”

Among those things, apparently, is running the Henry Miller Exhibit – which offers its own rewards – like the petting zoo, where young visitors can touch a pig, a goat or a chicken.

“I love to see the little kids, when they get that ‘I-understand-now’ look – that’s amazing. And I love it when people come in with children who don’t always have an opportunity to do these things like other kids. We bring the animals out and let them touch them. The tears we see in their families’ faces when they see that moment, it’s worth all the tiredness, all the pain and everything else that comes with doing this every year.”

Little Hands for Ag gets new name, honoring its founders

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

parents. Many are already involved in 4-H and FFA.

One of the most fascinating areas for kids is the beehive, tended by Gene Brandi. It's housed in a double-sided plexiglass space with a tube that allows the bees to fly in and out. "The children can actually see the bees come in with pollen," said Hendricks. Many search until they find the queen.

Throughout Little Hands, there are volunteers to happily explain "Fun Farm Facts" as the children make their way through.

Each year, the exhibit draws thousands of little hands. Before COVID, so many classes from the region were trying to reserve space that the Fair had to allocate times by lottery.

"There just weren't enough hours in the day to get all the kids in who wanted to come through," said Hendricks.

Hendricks said teachers can easily find ways to use what children see at Little Hands to emphasize state instructional standards.

"They're learning about caring for others, caring for animals; we talk about colors and shapes. They have to categorize when they put their items back – oranges go in the basket with oranges, tomatoes with tomatoes.

"A teacher familiar with the standards for their particular age of student could easily walk through and talk about the things they're learning and then take that back to the classroom."

This year, those who visit Little Hands will get a special treat – a book, in English, Spanish or Hmong. Hendricks secured a grant from the First Five of Merced County program to cover the costs. "It's awesome," she said.

When asked to take over the exhibit, Hendricks took the job seriously. She went online and found only one other active Little Hands exhibit – at the Minnesota State Fair. So, she took a field trip of her own.

"The Parreiras did such a fantastic job putting this whole thing together 20 years ago," Hendricks said. "It's smaller than the state fair, but it is equally excellent. ... There are really no other fairs in California that have an exhibit like Little Hands. It made me very proud."

There never would have been a "Little Hands for Ag" exhibit at the Merced County Spring Fair if it hadn't been for two pairs of very big hands – those of Barbara and Louie Parreira.

The Parreiras brought the Little Hands interactive exhibit to the Fair 20 years ago, patterning it after a program they encountered at fairs in the Midwest. Once they got it started, they remained involved for 17 years until COVID interrupted the Fair.

To honor their involvement, the Fair Board has renamed the popular exhibit "Barbara & Louie's Little Hands on the Farm."

With its new name, the exhibit is also getting a completely renovated space.

"It was two cattle barns, and they were basically open to the elements," explains Christie Hendricks, who now is charge. "The renovation allows us to have a secure exhibit; it will be clean and insulated. That means every year we won't have to go back in and sweep the leaves out.

"And putting the walls up will also allow us to have the potential to open the building at different times during the year for events -- like for the Tomato Festival, for example."

Little Hands, open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, takes children in pre-kindergarten through second grade through a complete farming cycle.

"They plant their seeds, they harvest their commodity while learning about swine, bees, cotton and all the rest," said Hendricks. "At each section, we'll have volunteers talking about plants, the animals, the process. There are sheep areas, a beef area, an area for dairy cows and one for bees.

"Then at the end they 'sell' their commodity to the market and get paid. In turn, they can use that pay to get healthy snacks."

A retired educator, Hendricks is talking about carrots, fruit, cheese sticks and other treats.

"It's kind of like the farm-to-table experience," she said.

It takes about 25 volunteers to keep it running smoothly, said Hendricks, and they range from older students to grand-



Gene Lieb/The Express

TOP: Students listen attentively as a volunteer explains where cotton comes from inside the Little Hands Exhibit; MIDDLE: A child studies all of the vegetables available inside the Little Hands Exhibit at the Merced County Spring Fair; LEFT: Laurie Rouch, left, volunteers her time to show children how to milk a cow at the Little Hands Exhibit.

How 'Barn in the USA' helped kick off a new Fair tradition

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

The Merced County Spring Fair is absolutely steeped in tradition. After all, it's been around for 133 years, having started when cattle king Henry Miller decided to throw a picnic for his many employees in 1890.

Sometimes, though, there's a need to start a new tradition – which is what the Fair Board did this year by initiating its annual Fair Theme essay contest. The fair board invited high school juniors and seniors to submit essays of 500 words explaining their theme ideas. In the past, the board would brainstorm ideas for themes for each year's fair.

had much to do with it.”

The hope for the essay contest is to involve students who might not otherwise feel connected to the Spring Fair.

“We came up with a plan to get more community involvement,” explained Crivelli, who works as a speech therapist in Los Banos Unified School District. “We thought it would be good to get kids who weren't invested only in ag. And we thought English teachers and art teachers could help and it would be great to get them involved, create some buy-in.”

Students had only about a month to submit essays by the late-November deadline. But the Fair's Heritage Foundation attached a \$500 scholar-

“

*Once I saw it, I said,
'That's it, that's it.'*

— Spring Fair board member Natasha Crivelli.

Madison Jasso, a junior at Los Banos High School, came up with “Barn in the USA.”

“It was just such a cute play on words,” said Spring Fair board member Natasha Crivelli. “It rang with patriotism. It felt very grassroots. Very Merced County.”

Madison Jasso says she is very patriotic, especially around Fair time. And while she doesn't live on a farm, she does spend a lot of time in the Los Banos High FFA barn. Put the two together, and ...

“Honestly, it just came to me. I go to up to the school farm a lot, and I got it off the song by Bruce Springsteen; it just came to me,” said Jasso, who is her FFA chapter's Sentinel.

Crivelli said the Springsteen connection didn't really occur to her until after the essay had been chosen.

“There were other judges, and no one brought that up, so I don't think it

ship for encouragement.

The board sent Jasso's winning concept to renowned West Side artist Katherine Crinklaw, who has created the Fair's posters and advertising for the past 30 years. Her poster is based on her original art, showing a red barn on a field of green; nearby is a flagpole with the American flag flying.

Crivelli was delighted with Crinklaw's poster, “Once I saw it, I said, ‘That's it, that's it.’”

In its first year, the contest drew entries from Los Banos and Pacheco high schools. Crivelli hopes that by starting in August or September, other schools will encourage more students to enter next year.

Jasso is the Sentinel for the Los Banos High FFA chapter and a standout volleyball player. Besides providing this year's theme and inspiring the poster, she will be showing her hog at the Fair.



Gene Lieb/The Express

Los Banos High School junior, Madison Jasso holds the fair poster that was inspired by her “Barn in the USA” essay.

May Day Pull features state's top tractors and a 'smoke show'

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

To get anywhere with the VTPA you're going to need a lot of pull. About 9,000 horses worth.

The Valley Tractor Pulling Association gets back into action for the first time this year on Saturday night at the Merced County Spring Fair in Los Banos. The show, which starts around 7 p.m., is included in the price of admission to the Fair.

"We call it the May Day Pull," said promoter George Avila, who is also a top-notch puller from Modesto. "It's the first major pull of the year because of all this weather. So, everybody's been itching to get out and test their new stuff. They want to see the improvements they've made, see if it all works."

The annual Los Banos pull is one of the Valley's best, drawing roughly 100 tractors and pick-ups to the Fairgrounds. Expect everything from Superstock "smokers" with their stacked engines to "cheater" classes to farm-stock to modified 4x4 pick-up trucks. For most classes, the engine blocks are "stock," but the modifications are extreme.

A typical farm tractor arrives from the factory with roughly 400 horsepower. When pullers finish boring out that stock block and altering the stroke then adding fuel-injected turbos, those same engines can generate 10 or 20 times the original horsepower. And they'll need it.

The Los Banos pull will have three 100-yard straight-line tracks, with pullers hooked to sleds that weighs 32,000 pounds. They're judged on distance.

The biggest, and most elaborate pullers are the super-stocks, aka "smokers."

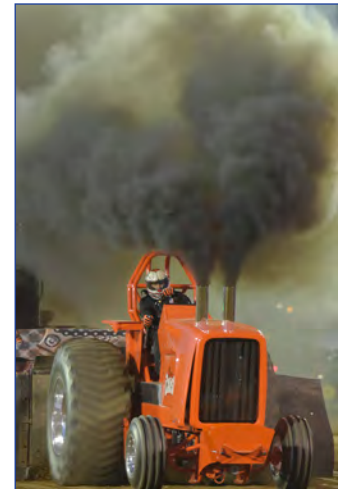
"They'll be here," said Avila. "They're the most popular, but they're pretty finicky. They're great to watch, if they're running."

The loudest are the pick-ups, which can really roar; tractors produce a high-pitched growl, said Avila.

For most of the top pullers in the state, it's not a long trip to the May Day Pull. Pullers like Chris Fagundes and Dan Brazil live nearby, while many more will drive over from Turlock, Modesto, Manteca, Hilmar, LeGrand and Firebaugh. Some of the top pick-up pullers drive over the hill from Hollister and Gilroy, said Avila.

Others will travel hundreds of miles for the opportunity to pull for points and prizes. One of the most popular is Quentin Thompson of Santa Margartia. Another crowd favorite is the LongShot pickup driven by Brad Griffin of Willits.

At stake is a modest prize pot for those in the "smoke show" pro classes. But most are pulling for VTPA points, which results in a buckle at the end of the season. Non-members are welcome but must compete under VPTA rules. The show starts at 7 p.m., but tractors will start arriving by lunchtime.



Gene Lieb/The Express

CLOCKWISE: Orange Crush is one of the many "smokers" performing in 2022 at the Merced County Spring Fair; The Pony Puller is one of many tractors pulling at the 2022 Spring Fair; The LongShot pickup driven by Brad Griffin of Willits pulls at the 2022 Spring Fair;

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Remembering the first woman to serve on Spring Fair Board

WESTSIDE EXPRESS STAFF

There's going to come a moment when Pat Gallichio will feel a lump in his throat. It might come as he hands out the first tiny gold sewing pin, or when he hands out the last. He doesn't know when, but he knows it will come.

Helen Gallichio spent 50 years as a community volunteer in Los Banos. Many of her efforts centered around 4-H, teaching girls to sew. Seeing the joy the girls got from making their presentations during the Merced County Spring Fair – or its predecessor, the May Day Fair -- always made Helen happy. But far too often, there were no ribbons or tangible tokens of the girls' accomplishments.

"All the livestock kids got ribbons and stuff," said Pat. "She wanted to make sure those kids got something.

To her, it was important. So, she made sure they got a pin, and a lot of them starting putting them on their hats."

Helen Gallichio was the first woman to serve on the Spring Fair Board of Directors and remained on it for 25 years. She also chaired the Central Valley Blood Center for the Westside; she earned local recognition as the Los Banos Woman of the Year and national recognition as a James Cash Penny Award winner. Hellen Gallichio passed away on March 31; she was 91.

Among many survivors is her son Pat, who has followed in his parents' footsteps as a community volunteer. He has spent 17 years on the Spring Fair Board and was a founding member of the Fair's Heritage Committee.

He'll be the one handing out the pins to girls this year.

Since the announcement of his mother's death, Pat has been getting a lot of phone calls. "It's mindboggling," he said, "the families and kids that my mother touched through 4-H. I'm getting phone calls and letters from kids she taught 30, 40, 60 years ago and they want to tell me how she touched their lives."

Many of them, said Pat, recalled the pin they had received with Helen's help.

"She wanted to make sure that her sewing kids got some recognition," said Pat. The pins didn't signify best-of-show or a grand prize, just a form of encouragement. "To her, it was a big deal. And it was a big deal to those kids who would run up to get their pins. So now that's my deal, to give out those awards.

"And this year it will be a little tough."



Helen Gallichio

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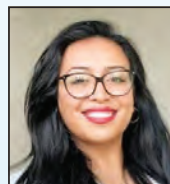
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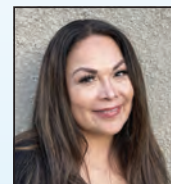
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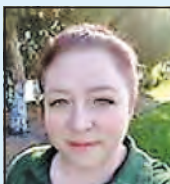
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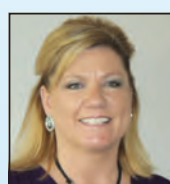
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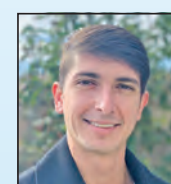
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