



PHOTOS BY KAREN QUINCY LOBERG/THE STAR

Ana Gonzalez leads daughter Natalie Gonzalez by the hand with son Ulises Gonzalez in tow while Jose Magana, whom she baby-sits, puts a doll on the hopscotch game stenciled into the Born Learning Trail at Las Piedras Park in Santa Paula.

# On the learning trail

The Born Learning Trail has bilingual instructional signs at Las Piedras Park in Santa Paula.



## ■ Park reborn in Santa Paula

By **Claudia Boyd-Barrett**  
Special to The Star

Santa Paula's popular Las Piedras Park is getting a face-lift.

Construction workers have been installing a new playground at the site of an old one that burned down in an arson fire last year. The playground could be completed by the end of January, said Ed Mount, Santa Paula's interim community services manager.

Meanwhile, as parents

See TRAIL, 2B

## TRAIL from 1B

and children wait for the playground to open, a coalition of nonprofit groups in partnership with the city have installed an activity trail aimed at entertaining and educating the area's youngest residents.

First 5 Ventura County, which provides programs for children up to age 5, installed the Born Learning Trail at the park in November with the help of the United Way and volunteers from Wells Fargo Bank.

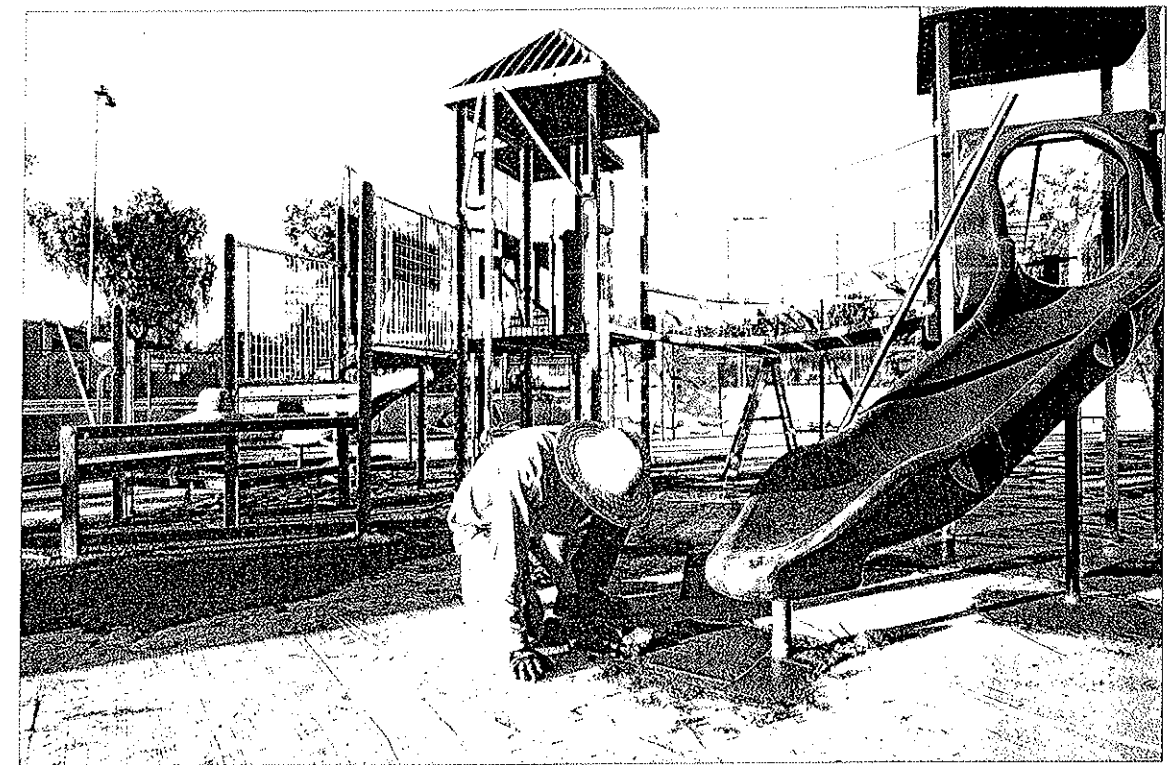
The trail runs through the middle of the park, alongside the playground, and has nine activity stations with signs in English and Spanish that offer on-the-spot ideas and games for parents and young children. The activities are designed to promote physical movement, language and pre-literacy skills for toddlers and preschoolers.

Activities include hopscotch, counting, observing the natural environment and talking about shapes and colors.

"Really, the goal is that parents are interacting with their children and getting that early learning while they're outside," said Heather Hannah, resource development manager for First 5 Ventura County. "This is a way that children and their parents or caregivers can play and learn together."

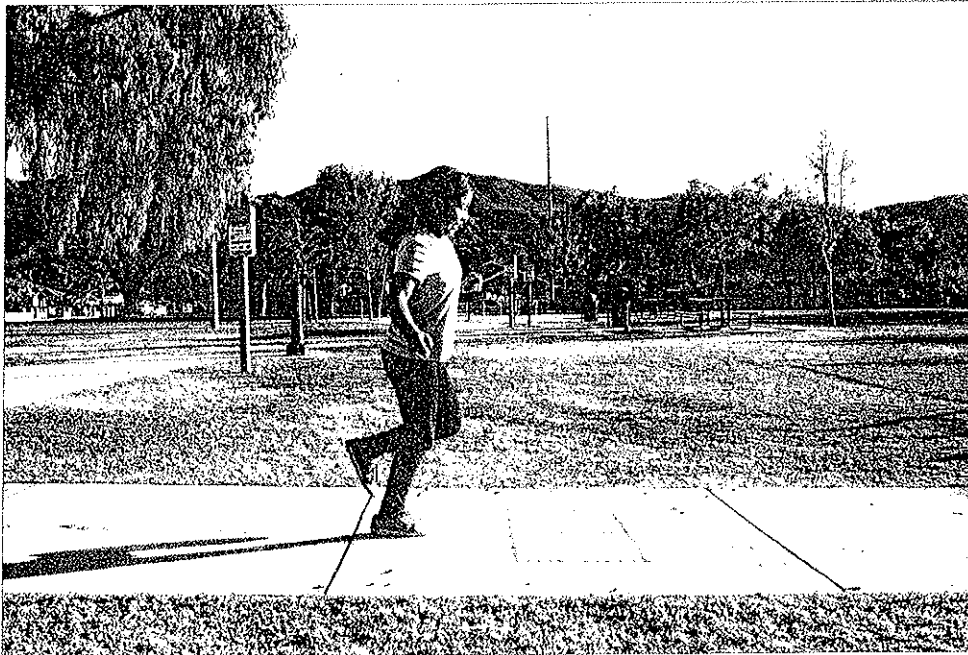
Organizers dedicated the trail to longtime Santa Paula family physician Dr. Lisa Solinas. The doctor works at the Santa Paula West Medical Clinic. She attended the trail's opening ceremony Nov. 7, along with clinic staff and community members.

"What we heard from a lot of folks was that they had been impacted positively by Dr. Solinas," Hannah said. "Many of the children who live in that neighborhood were delivered by her, and the families had a



PHOTOS BY KAREN QUINCY LOBERG/THE STAR

Daniel Anders, a carpenter, smooths out the cement at the Las Piedras Park playground. The park is also home to the Born Learning Trail.



Maria Magaña plays hopscotch while she and her family use the Born Learning Trail at Las Piedras Park in Santa Paula.

positive experience."

In addition to the new trail and playground, the city has improved the park's soccer field and installed lighting.

Hannah said First 5 and the United Way selected Las Piedras Park for the trail because of ongoing

revitalization efforts there, and because many families receiving First Five services live in the area. First 5 operates a learning center about a mile away.

Resident Ana Gonzalez uses the trail and is waiting for the new

playground. She works as a baby sitter for six children and brings them to the park every day. The children like to walk around the park and play on the trail, she said.

On a recent afternoon, Gonzalez walked through the park with several of

the children, including 9-year-old Maria Magaña, who was happily jumping on the hopscotch grid.

"It's very practical. ... I can get the kids to do exercise and activities and they get back home all relaxed," Gonzalez said in Spanish.

# County's Medi-Cal numbers skyrocketing

■ Four years ago it served 100K residents

By Tom Klisken  
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More than one of four people in Ventura County receives health insurance

through a Medi-Cal system pointed primarily at low-income people.

About half the children younger than 5 in the county are also covered through the Medi-Cal program funded by federal and state governments, according to the Gold Coast Health Plan.

Gold Coast is the managed care organization launched four years ago

to administer Medi-Cal in Ventura County. Back then, it served about 100,000 residents.

That number has mushroomed to 202,360, officials announced this month.

State data shows thousands of other people are covered by programs outside of Gold Coast, bringing total Medi-Cal membership to 227,500 people in a

county of 846,178.

The other surprising number — the 50 percent of young children covered — could grow next year because of a California law extending coverage to undocumented minors.

To some, high coverage numbers are surprising in a county considered among the state's wealthier, with a family median income

of \$86,000. Others say the numbers reflect dramatic changes in the Medi-Cal health system and poverty that pockmarks areas of the county.

"We see a growing number of families who are in poverty or the working poor and don't have the means to lift themselves out," said Claudia Harrison, executive director of First 5

Ventura County.

Perhaps the most powerful trigger for change has been the reshaping of a Medi-Cal program once aimed at very low-income families with children.

The Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare, expanded eligibility in 2014 to people in the tiers above

See MEDI-CAL, 3A

## MEDI-CAL from 1A

the federal poverty line. That means families of four with incomes of \$33,465 — likely ineligible under the old rules but still financially stretched — qualify for coverage.

A complicated eligibility formula was simplified and based solely on income, meaning people could qualify even if they were single and had no children.

In other changes, the Healthy Families program aimed at families who previously didn't qualify for Medi-Cal were folded into the insurance program. That means children from households with incomes as high as \$64,505 for a family of four qualify for coverage, although they have to cover some costs.

The changes ignited enrollment. Ventura County Health Services Agency officials said they originally expected enrollment to plateau at 175,000 members, but it rocketed past that mark.



Medi-Cal enrollment in the Gold Coast Health Plan has rocketed to 202,360 people.

Across California, 12.8 million people are now enrolled in Medi-Cal — about one-third of all state residents. About 1.4 million children younger than 5 are covered statewide, comprising 56 percent of all youth in the age range.

The rise shows how

Medi-Cal's role has changed, said Anthony Wright, director of Health Access California.

"It's gone from being a health care program for some categories of children and senior with disabilities to a safety net for all of us when we might need it," he

said. "If you and I are between jobs, we might be eligible for Medi-Cal — that's a good thing."

But the program's primary focus remains low-income populations. That's why the inclusion of 50 percent of children younger than 5 in Medi-Cal makes Harrison anxious. She heads a nonprofit group that focuses on early childhood health and development, with half of the families served earning less than \$20,000 a year.

"There are a lot of kids in poverty in Ventura County," she said, citing a United Way study contending 25 percent of families in Ventura County don't make enough to meet basic needs.

The study also highlighted the struggles of families relying on low-paying jobs. It said two parents with an infant and a school-aged child would have to hold more than three full-time, minimum-wage jobs to

survive.

Harrison said rising Medi-Cal numbers show people in need are receiving health insurance. She praised local enrollment efforts.

Wendy Aiens views things differently. She isn't surprised more than one of four Ventura County residents is covered by Medi-Cal. She just wishes she was one of them.

The Santa Paula resident works as a medical assistant and makes less than \$1,400 a month.

She has been told she misses the limit for Medi-Cal. She said costs of private health coverage, even through the Covered California marketplace created by the Affordable Care Act, are too high.

So she goes without, bidding her time until she can apply for Medi-Cal again.

"I'd rather have that," she said. "I can't afford Obamacare."

# Families start new year on ice, with smiles

■ Skating, dinner, gifts add to the joy

By Alicia Doyle  
Special to The Star

More than 450 adults and children celebrated the new year with free ice skating, dinner and gifts at the third annual "Start the New Year with a Smile" event at Iceoplex in Simi Valley.

The New Year's Eve party, by invitation only, was designed for low-income

families in Simi Valley who were referred through First Five, the YMCA and the Simi Valley Samaritan Center.

"The most important thing about this night is the excitement from these people," said Betty Eskey, executive director at Simi Valley Samaritan Center. "They're not worrying if they have to pay or what they're going to eat. They're more concerned about the excitement of the evening."

The event, supported

See SMILE, 2B



Valeria Rios (left) and Jennifer Rios share a stabilization bar on the ice during the annual New Year's Eve skating party hosted by the Samaritan Center, Tri-County Youth Productions and Iceoplex in Simi Valley.  
KAREN QUINCY LOBERG/  
THE STAR

## SMILE from 1B

by dozens of volunteers, offered dinner and dessert as well as free stuffed animals and backpacks filled with goods for the children. Guests received free time on the ice rink, which was decorated with Christmas trees and small piles of faux snow for the children to play in.

The Samaritan Center established a "used clothing store" on site where families could pick out jackets, shoes, socks and other items to take home. At the end of the evening, the children were invited to pick out toys that were donated by the community.

Jennifer Jones, who brought four children and her mother this year, participated for the second time.

"It means a lot to my family," said Jones, of Simi Valley. "They have a lot of fun."

Her mother, Patricia Jones, said the outing was particularly special because her daughter is disabled.

"Because she's disabled it makes it difficult for her to do things with her kids," Patricia Jones said. "It's just wonderful for them they really



Javier Elisalde (from front left) waits for his daughter, Emily Elisalde, and Kailey Navarro to finish donning their skates for an evening at Iceoplex in Simi Valley on Thursday night.

appreciate it."

This year, for the first time, the youngsters took rides on a sleigh built by Pat McCormick, a hockey coach at the Iceoplex, and Brad Kahle, the son of Cathy Kahle, originator of "Start the New Year with a Smile."

"I want every family to start the New Year with a smile and just hope that it prospers throughout 2016," said Cathy Kahle, of Simi Valley. "We just want it to be magical for them."

The goal of the event was for every guest to enter the New Year with joy, said Scott Slinger, owner of the Iceoplex.

"Times are rough especially now," said Slinger, of Somis. "We thought things were rough three

what's going on," Slinger said. "The bottom line is to make them feel a little better."

Simi Valley Mayor Bob Huber attended to wish the guests a happy New Year.

"I commend Scott Slinger and his staff and Iceoplex for stepping up every year on behalf of people in our community to make this season better for them," Huber said.

June Ewart, a volunteer, said she hoped the event set the tone for 2016.

"We want to give them hope for a good New Year," said Ewart, of Simi Valley. "One thing I love about this event is it falls after the Christmas holiday. Oftentimes we kind of forget because the holiday is over, so it's nice to continue to give and start the New Year with a smile."

years ago with families. Then it got rougher the second year that we did it; and this third year it's not any better for people out there."

"At the end of the night when these kids get off the ice and they go home with a little gift they just feel a little bit better about

# Cultivating a future for our county

If you are like me, you welcome this New Year with measured anticipation. One of my favorite traditions is to find a saying (or two) that captures a moment or personal goal achieved from the past that can influence the coming year. The expression, "mighty oaks from little acorns grow," uniquely fits as I complete my final term as chair of the Ventura County Board of Supervisors and embark on an ambitious last year of public service on the board.

The County of Ventura's mission is to ensure that all residents have the opportunity to improve their quality of life while enjoying the benefits of a safe, healthy and vibrant community. I am proud to have been a part of a number of key initiatives as chair of the board to fulfill that mission for future generations.

A healthy community helps advance the well-being of all residents. That is why in early 2015, I introduced the "Health In All Policies" framework to formalize the county's commitment to improve health, in cooperation with Public Health and a multitude of partners responsible for making policy decisions. Working together, we can do better to prevent and manage chronic diseases



**GUEST COLUMNIST**

in our community such as diabetes and childhood obesity.

"Health In All Policies" will be an important element of our county's general plan update. This update is a significant opportunity for our community to provide input on what defines the goals, policies and programs that create the "blueprint" for a healthier future in Ventura County. We welcome community participation.

It has been said, "seek the wisdom of the ages, but look at the world through the eyes of a child." Children account for 24 percent of our population, with one in five living in poverty. An unconscionable statistic that challenges all of us to do better.

It is commonly recognized that the best way to ensure the well-being of children is to strengthen families. I appreciate the collaborative work of First Five Commission and Community Commission of Ventura County in their efforts to reduce childhood poverty, and

their partnership to care for those most vulnerable in our community.

In 2015, the County Board of Supervisors invested in children by managing dynamic changes in health care and improving services to help alleviate pressure on our families, ultimately reducing long-term costs to our community. We did this through the purchase of a behavioral health outpatient center for children as alternative care to costly psychiatric hospitalization.

Our Human Services Agency launched a new "Foster Health Link" website designed to improve the health of children in foster care. This electronic health records system helps eliminate a costly patchwork of records and improves accuracy of information that aims to prevent a statewide challenge in the child welfare system of over-prescribing medications.

Most recently, we celebrated the renewal of Ventura County Medical Center's and Santa Paula Hospital's "Baby-Friendly" status from the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund, the only hospitals in Ventura County to hold that prestigious designation and two of only 315 hospitals in the nation.

As the county's representative on the California State Association of Counties (CSAC) Board of Directors and chair of CSAC's Women's Leadership Forum, 2015 included statewide attention on the impact of human trafficking on counties. Locally, our board adopted a resolution affirming our commitment toward preventing the commercial sexual exploitation of children. This commitment gives us an opportunity to leverage additional support from state and national law enforcement agencies to provide appropriate services to victims and prosecute perpetrators of sex trafficking.

There will be time for goodbyes, but not yet. 2016 will be an ambitious year to address a local framework for statewide marijuana initiatives; focus on stable housing for homeless, especially our veterans; and create a sustainable revenue source to support our local transportation needs. I still have a few more acorns to plant. Until then, thank you for the opportunity to continue to serve as your representative on the Board of Supervisors.

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Kathy I. Long is chair of the Ventura County Board of Supervisors and represents the 3rd District.