

SAMPLING
NEW MEXICO'S
MANY COLORS

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

SUNDAY

A soaring balloon spectacle is one of the many things the beautiful desert state has to offer.

PAGE C4



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HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS AWARENESS WEEK

From childhood to adulthood, life's been a struggle for Regina Meaux. She doesn't want that for her own children.



MINDY SCHAUER — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Regina Meaux and her 14-year-old daughter, Danielle Moreno, visit the Anaheim grave of Meaux's 5-year-old son, Ivan Sandoval, on Sept. 18. The little boy died in a June car crash with his father at the wheel. She says she is trying to give her children a better upbringing than she had.

Motel Kid to Motel Mom?

AN OC SURVIVOR REFUSES TO LET IT HAPPEN

By Theresa Walker » thwalker@scng.com

When she was 8, Regina Meaux did what a lot of young girls do.

She slipped her little feet into a pair of too-big high heel shoes and played grown-up.

Were they her mother's shoes? She can't remember. She's 32 now and her own children are older than she was then. She can only look at a picture, taken more than two decades ago, and wonder.

The photograph shows her from the waist down — pink shorts, scraped knees, green crew socks and battered white pumps. She teeters amid rain puddles on the broken asphalt at the Fire Station Motel in Garden Grove.

Her name back then was Regina Bartlett, and her life was a struggle against a toxic pairing of poverty and bad parenting.

Today, she's determined to give her own children a better chance. But she is dealing with the loss of her young son while trying to raise his older sisters in a safe place they can call their own.

She's needed help, something that didn't come soon enough when she was a child.

SURVIVOR » PAGE 12



Regina Meaux was named Regina Bartlett in 1998 when the photo above was published as part of a project on children living in motels. At left, she plays grown-up in heels outside her room at the Fire Station Motel in Garden Grove. She is still struggling to leave the hardships of her dysfunctional childhood behind.

DANIEL A. ANDERSON
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

SOUTHLAND

Deal averts Kaiser strike

Tentative 4-year contract heads off walkout of some 27,000 nurses and other staff set to begin Monday

By Kevin Smith
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Kaiser Permanente and the Alliance of Health Care Unions reached a tentative agreement Saturday on a four-year contract, avoiding a strike of nurses and other workers set to begin Monday.

The strike would have seen nearly 27,000 Kaiser Permanente workers in 22 local unions walk off their Southern California jobs beginning Monday.

"This agreement will mean patients will continue to receive the best care, and Alliance members will have the best jobs," said Hal Ruddick, executive director of the alliance. "This contract protects our patients, provides safe staffing and guarantees fair wages and benefits for every Alliance member."

KAISER » PAGE 21

COSTA MESA

Legislators to address OC oil spill at hearing

Officials hope a special state committee hearing Monday will point them toward any changes to laws and procedures that could help prevent future oil spills and improve responses. PAGE A3

U.N. CLIMATE SUMMIT

Nations compromise on coal to strike agreement

Almost 200 nations have accepted a compromise deal aimed at keeping a key global warming target alive, but it contained a last-minute change that watered down language about coal. U.S. climate envoy John Kerry said governments had no choice but to accept the coal language change: "If we hadn't done that we wouldn't have had an agreement." PAGE A24



PANDEMIC

Hospital chaplains treat minds and souls

By Deepa Bharath
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As sunlight streamed into the little chapel on a recent afternoon, the Rev. Jan Lee handed ukuleles to the group that had gathered, some wearing scrubs with plastic hair caps and booties while they sat in a circle.

"This little guy or gal will

become your friend for the rest of your life," Lee said as he distributed the instruments to his eager students.

The setting for this ukulele class is the nondenominational chapel at the Torrance Memorial Medical Center. The students are largely health care workers taking a break from their busy shifts. Their teacher is Lee, the hos-

pital's chaplain and spiritual care provider.

As health care workers provide care to patients in an environment that has become more stressful as the coronavirus pandemic continues, hospitals are increasingly stepping in to provide emotional and spiritual support for their employees.

CHAPLAINS » PAGE 21



The Rev. Jan Lee, right, a chaplain at Torrance Memorial Medical Center, has started teaching ukulele to health care workers to help them relax from the stress of the coronavirus pandemic. It's just one of the ways he tries to support them.

BRITTANY MURRAY
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

INDEX

Coronavirus tracker A10 | Focus Page A16 | Lottery A2 | Pets A4
Earthweek A24 | Local A3 | Obituaries A34-35 | Real Estate Y4-12

TODAY'S FORECAST

Coastal: High 79/Low 56
Inland: High 92/Low 59
Full weather report A22

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TRAVEL



Hundreds of lighter-than-air craft float above Albuquerque, New Mexico, each year during its International Balloon Fiesta, billed as the largest gathering of its kind in the world.

LOCAL COLOR IN NEW MEXICO

What to see first? A soaring balloon spectacle, green and red chiles galore or ‘meth’ from ‘Breaking Bad’?



TOP: Santa Fe’s historic federal building is now the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts and a standout downtown.

RIGHT: Chile peppers are a popular motif — even ending up in holiday wreaths — as are animal skulls reminiscent of Georgia O’Keeffe paintings. A museum dedicated to her work is in Santa Fe.

BOTTOM: Guests on the Breaking Bad RV Tour can see a mobile “meth lab” and the money-laundering car wash portrayed in the hit series.



**Story and photos by
Norma Meyer » Correspondent**

Rising 10 stories tall, the planet’s largest flying pig is surreally inflating near my feet, while overhead a real therapy dog named Bandit co-pilots a soaring, multicolored hot air balloon. Hundreds of propane-fueled spectacles create a rainbow-bright kaleidoscope in the skies of quirky Albuquerque — look, there’s Yoda! I’m in the “Hot Air Balloon Capital of the World,” which is in the “Chile Capital of the World,” although I’ll get to that peppery part later. Albuquerque’s annual International Balloon Fiesta is like some fantastical, jolly, fire-breathing city. For nine days in October, thousands of spectators arrive before dawn and meander among flattened balloons as they ginormously expand into eye-popping rows of towering, wind-spurred wonders. Just after sunrise, with a whooshing sound and heat of their burners, it’s a mass magical up, up, and away. Wait, is that a floating cheetah?

The balloon extravaganza isn’t the only high during my first trip to vibrant New Mexico. Albuquerque, as fellow “Breaking Bad” fans know, was the backdrop of the hit series, so I’ll tour past film locations in a derelict RV that resembles Walter and Jesse’s rolling meth lab. I’ll also visit nearby, history-rich Santa Fe, where I’ll be on the tail of Billy the Kid when I’m not on the Margarita Trail.

Alert your tongue. New Mexico may be the only state with an official question enacted by its Legislature — “Red or green?” — which refers to what kind of chiles you prefer when ordering cuisine. (Many locals answer “Christmas,” which means both.) This spicy staple is everywhere. Green chile kimchi, green chile pesto, red chile mustard, cherry chile truffles, chile door wreaths, candles, car air fresheners. I lip-smack Hatch green chile white wine and chimayo red chile red at Noisy Water Winery in Albuquerque’s Old Town, founded in 1706. A kick indeed.

Afterwards, I amble down adobe-lined streets to The Candy Lady and chat with Debbie Ball, the cheeky, 69-year-old owner who was once picketed for and still sells X-rated chocolate phalluses. She also was enlisted by the prop department of “Breaking Bad” to cook up fake clear and blue crystal meth used on the show’s five seasons — it’s actually rock candy that she deals to tourists at her store.

“We sell a little dollar dime bag and a \$10 distributor bag. People say, ‘How come it’s not labeled?’ I say, ‘Since when do you label drugs?’ It all comes in little brown bags.” (Note to self: Don’t put in my carry-on.)

For the Balloon Fiesta alone (the purported birthplace of the breakfast burrito), New Mexico nails its Land of Enchantment nickname. Set in a 72-acre park, the hypnotic jamboree features a slew of events including evening balloon glows, when it appears massive, teardrop-shaped neon UFOs are commandeering the grassy field. Next year is the 50th anniversary (balloonfiesta.com), with more stratospheric surprises.

I’m planted on earth my first festival day, before being invited to sail the next morning with Bandit “The Balloon Dog,” a mellow, 9-year-old Queensland heeler who when aloft pokes his furry head out the window of the passenger basket. Unfortunately, brisk winds cancel our flight and others on two festival days. “One problem would be landing,” says pilot Jeff Haliczler, a retired special ed teacher and Bandit’s dad. Finding enough terra firma is already tricky — ballooning is year-round in Albuquerque, so residents are asked to lay out a huge “X” or a white sheet to indicate its OK to plop on their property. (Think how insane it would be to see 60-foot-wide Hamlet the hog descend in your backyard.)

Basically, pilots can control a balloon up and down, but they depend on currents at different altitudes to travel horizontally. “I chew gum when I fly so I’m able to spit over the side and watch as it falls to see what the wind layers down below are doing,” pilot Cindy Heinrich explains. “Some pilots also drop little bits of shaving cream or whipped cream.”

From Albuquerque, I drive one hour to atmospheric Santa Fe, the oldest capital city in the U.S. You can step back four centuries strolling downtown among adobe Pueblo and colonial landmarks of the Spanish, Mexican and indigenous past. Native American artists sell turquoise jewelry under the portico of the low-slung Palace of the Governors, built in 1610 and home of 19th-century governor Lew Wallace while he penned the bestselling tome “Ben Hur.” Billy the Kid lived here during his young teens, supposedly washing dishes at what is now the La Fonda Hotel. Later, after the notorious outlaw was wanted for murder, Wallace refused to pardon him.

I’m peering at the plaque denoting the jail site where Billy spent three months in 1880-1881, when a spiffy guy approaches and cajoles, “Come in, I’ll give you a sample for your eyes.” It’s now a shop marketing pricey cannabis skin care products. Around the corner, a competing plaque also claims to be the prison where The Kid cooled in a cell.

Since Santa Fe is artsy, I’ll soon gape at renowned paintings of a horse’s skull and a ram’s cranium at the esteemed Georgia O’Keeffe Museum. Then on to the tequila-splashed Margarita Trail. Don’t try this in one stint, but trailblazers can get their \$3 “passport” stamped (good for discounts and prizes) at 42 places concocting libations such as smoked sage margaritas and strawberry-jalapeño margaritas. Santa Fe is also a gastro mecca — top marks go to Sazon restaurant, although being a veggie, I passed on the chile-infused, garlic-citrus baby grasshoppers.

“We call this time-traveling for the palate,” says Bonnie Bennett, co-owner of Kaka Chocolate House, which makes Mesoamerican cacao drinks from 2,500-year-old recipes. I lap up a Chile Chocolate Elixir.

Back in Albuquerque, I confront my worst fears. Hello, albino western diamondback and your writhing cousins. The American International Rattlesnake Museum boasts more species of slithery venomous serpents than anywhere else in the world. It’s also likely the only museum that presents patrons with a “Certificate of Bravery.”

Next, I’m inside a deliberately dinged-up, duct tape-patched RV with an onboard “meth lab” outfitted with “cooking” apparatus. “This is a 1987 Fleetwood Bounder, the same make and model used on ‘Breaking Bad,’” enthuses tour operator Frank Sandoval, who portrayed a DEA agent in the background of one episode. “Obviously we put the bullet holes in the door.”

The Breaking Bad RV Tour is a hoot. Sandoval yells, “Rolling!” and plays video clips of scenes before arriving at the corresponding 20 film locations. We eat breakfast burritos inside Los Pollos Hermanos, the fast-food front of drug kingpin Gus Fring. (It’s really called Twisters.) We walk through the car wash that was the money-laundering business for Bryan Cranston’s lead character, Walt. We glimpse Walt and wife Skyler’s tract home from our frayed seats.

When the wild tour ends, I head to a former mental hospital. That would be the restored Hotel Parq Central and its rooftop Apothecary Lounge. Here, you’ll have a prime seat for one of Albuquerque’s stellar perks — blazing sunsets that paint the vast Big Sky in psychedelic reds and orange. Truly the perfect spot to hoist a Southwestern-style prickly pear margarita — just don’t make mine with a red-hot chile-salted rim.