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CREDITS ROLL AT DRIVE-IN

Longtime moviegoers and employees share memories as Santee theater shows its final double feature



K.C. ALFRED U-T PHOTOS

Above: Manager Beth Preller, who has worked at the Santee Drive-In for 25 years, runs the projection room on Sunday evening. Top: Patrons fill the parking lot to watch the musical film "Wonka" on New Year's Eve, the drive-in's last night of operation.

BY PAUL SISSON

Some watched from piles of blankets in parked hatchbacks, others sat on camp chairs, sipping warm drinks and munching everything from home cooking to concession stand popcorn as colorful images played across the twin screens at the Santee Drive-In on Sunday night.

The mood was all at once jubilant and a little bittersweet. They came prepared to celebrate the start of 2024 and the end of an East County institution, one that entertained generations during its 65-year run on North Woodside Avenue.

There to watch a double feature that started with "Wonka" and ended with "Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom" were longtime friends Melanie Ross and Kim Ruby, pen pals who found out they lived down the street from each other at age 8 and have been co-conspirators ever since.

The pair, and Ross' husband, Mark Grover, sat at a folding table with subdued lighting and laden with homemade pasta Bolognese and Mexican hot chocolate.

Sitting there as the sky darkened, they recalled childhood memories coming to this particular place, jumbled up with family and friends, a one-night community built just for fun.

"I remember coming here in my pajamas with my parents as a kid and them putting the box with the speaker in the window,"

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ISRAEL TO WITHDRAW THOUSANDS OF TROOPS FROM GAZA

Experts say temporary drawdown likely signals new targeted stage of war

BY AARON BOXERMAN, ISABEL KERSHNER & ERIC SCHMITT

JERUSALEM

The Israeli military said Monday that it would begin withdrawing several thousand troops from the Gaza Strip at least temporarily, in what was the most significant publicly announced reduction since the war with Hamas began.

The military cited a growing toll on the Israeli economy after nearly three months of wartime mobilization with little end in sight to the fighting. Israel had been considering scaling back its operations, and the United States has been prodding it to do so more quickly as the death toll and privation in Gaza rose.

More than 20,000 people have been killed in Gaza since the beginning of the war, most of them civilians, according to local health authorities, primarily in Israeli bombings. With aid delivery restricted and aid workers unable to move safely within the territory, half of Gaza's roughly 2.2 million people are at risk of starvation, according to the United Nations.

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the Israeli military spokesperson, emphasized that the move to demobilize some soldiers did not suggest any compromise of Israel's intention to continue fighting until it destroys Hamas, and the fighting across Gaza remained intense. Hagari, who had said he expected "warfare throughout this year," indicated that some troops would be called back to service in 2024.

He did not mention the U.S. requests to scale back, and Israeli

SEE ISRAEL • A5

AS HOUSING VOUCHERS END, MANY FACE TOUGH DECISIONS

County program helps residents pay their rent, but rising costs a factor

BY BLAKE NELSON

On a fall Saturday, a little before her 60th birthday, Allison Blanks got a letter.

It had four typed sentences. She read them in her El Cajon apartment, which she moved into almost two years ago after a long stretch living out of motels and a Chevrolet Spark.

"The Housing Authority of the County of San Diego has made a decision to terminate your participation in the Local Rental Subsidy Program," the letter said. Starting February, "You will no longer receive benefits and will be responsible for paying the entire rent."

The news wasn't entirely a shock. Blanks remembered being told that the assistance was temporary.

Still, she started to shake. As the region's homelessness crisis grows, vouchers that help cover rent have emerged as a key tool for keeping people off the street. But the rising cost of housing, a lack of affordable homes and finite resources often leave leaders with limited options concerning who to aid.

Some programs are growing. The county recently announced it was receiving nearly 50 new vouchers for young adults and families affected by the foster care system.

"This is great news as we're trying to create our framework to really end homelessness," Board of Supervisors Chair Nora Vargas said at a December news conference.

SEE HOUSING • A5

CALIF. EXPANDS HEALTH CARE COVERAGE FOR LOW-INCOME IMMIGRANTS

BY TRÂN NGUYEN

SACRAMENTO

More than 700,000 immigrants living illegally in California are now able to access free health care as part of one of the state's most ambitious coverage expansions in a decade.

The effort, which took effect Monday, is expected to eventually cost the state about \$3.1 billion per year and inches California closer to Democrats' goal of providing universal health care to its roughly 39 million residents.

Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom and lawmakers agreed in 2022 to provide health care access to all low-income adults regardless of their immigration status through the state's Medicaid program, known as Medi-Cal.

California is the most populous state to guarantee such coverage, though Oregon began doing so in July.

Newsom called the expansion "a

SEE HEALTH • A4

ROARING IN THE NEW YEAR



FRANCINE ORR LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

The San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance's entry in the 135th Rose Parade makes its way through Pasadena on Monday. The "It Began With a Roar" float, the zoo's fourth entry in the storied event's history, won the grand prize Sweepstakes Trophy. See more photos, A7.

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