

The Sunday Californian

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Honor guard members of the Veterans Association stand during the Memorial Day weekend ceremony Saturday morning at the Bakersfield National Cemetery.

NICK ELLIS / FOR THE CALIFORNIAN

Honoring our fallen war heroes

Bakersfield National Cemetery held a Memorial Day weekend ceremony Saturday. The private event took place at 8 a.m. It featured the placing of a special wreath, lowering the main flag to half-staff, a rifle volley and buglers playing taps.



Honor guard member Paul Petersen plays taps during Saturday's ceremony at the cemetery.



Randy Heard, left, director of the Bakersfield National Cemetery, and Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield address the media Saturday during the Memorial Day weekend ceremony at the cemetery.



How Kern won state's approval to reopen

BY STACEY SHEPARD
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County leaders scored a major victory last week when Kern won approval from the state to accelerate the reopening of the local economy.

In order to do so, the county had to show that COVID-19 activity in Kern had stabilized by meeting certain epidemiological benchmarks. The county also had to demonstrate its preparedness to deal with the virus and provide a written containment plan.

The epidemiological benchmarks were the biggest obstacle for the county.

The data Kern provided to the state on Tuesday ultimately satisfied the criteria but the county is expected to maintain those levels to some degree. And that could prove difficult.

In fact, a review of available data by The Californian showed that Kern County fell below the state benchmark just a few days after it submitted its data to the state on one critical metric, stabilized rates of hospitalization.

There are no concrete details yet available on how strictly the county must remain in compliance with the

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VIEWPOINT

Freedom from tyranny isn't freedom if it just lasts two weeks

There's a homemade sign planted along Stockdale Highway a short distance from my house that makes what seems like a patriotic declaration: "Stop the Tyranny," it shouts. "Open California Now." A small U.S. flag attached to the top certifies the sign-maker's credentials.

The tyranny in question is apparently that of California Gov. Gavin Newsom and, perhaps by extension, the Kern County Public Health Services Department, whose leaders have said they intend to follow his directives regarding containment of the coronavirus.



ROBERT PRICE
FOR THE CALIFORNIAN

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EYE STREET



Kern Valley State Prison's inmate-run newspaper highlights achievements and rehabilitation

PAGE E1

Bakersfield man overcomes act of violence, years of struggle to finally earn diploma

BY EMA SASIC
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When Jacob Emilio Beltran thinks about his high school self, it's hard to believe it's the same person.

Sure, both enjoy painting and showing off an endless collection of sports hats and jerseys. But the way he values education has completely changed.

Six years ago, Beltran cared more about earning money than studying for a math test. Today, the high school diploma he will soon receive is his ticket

to a better, brighter future.

"It felt like something that had to be done, and now I've accomplished it," he said.

But the journey to graduation was nothing short of a "roller coaster" for the 26-year-old.

Four years ago, he was a victim in a random act of violence, leaving him paralyzed and without a lung.

In the years since, Beltran has had to relearn how to breathe on his own, talk and write with

Please see **BELTRAN | A4**



Jacob Emilio Beltran, middle, plays dominos with his grandfather, Ben Gomez Sr., almost daily and takes great pride when he wins.

ALEX HORVATH
THE CALIFORNIAN



PRICE: \$2

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BELTRAN

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his left hand. Despite the countless surgeries, hospital stays and tough days, holding a high school diploma in his hands never escaped his mind.

'CONFUSED ABOUT EDUCATION'

Beltran, a Bakersfield native, didn't have a good relationship with school. He switched between Mira Monte, North and Vista high schools and Bakersfield Adult School, and when he'd build up motivation to go, he'd usually get bored and give up a week later.

When he was 20 years old, he decided to leave school for good.

"I was more or less confused about education," he said. "I'd think to myself, 'Eh, I don't really have to do this.'"

His independent study teacher at Bakersfield Adult School, Laurel Britton, said Beltran was always "academically able." When he quit school, he only had a few outstanding credits.

ONE FATEFUL NIGHT

When he was 22, his life changed completely.

He doesn't remember too much from the incident, but recalls picking up pizza late one night near Niles Street when he had an encounter with an unidentified individual, who tried to take the pizza away. As Beltran ran away, he couldn't escape danger.

Three bullets punctured one of Beltran's lungs and severed his spine.

"I was considered dead at the scene," Beltran explained.

Doctors at Kern Medical revived him, and he underwent surgery to take out pieces of scrap metal from his stomach and chest. To this day, bullets are still in Beltran's spine, and he doesn't know who attacked him.

His grandmother, Christine Gomez, remembers getting a knock on the door from one of Beltran's friends late at night to share the news, and she and her husband, Ben, rushing to the hospital.

The doctor said damage to Beltran's spine was irreversible; he would be paralyzed from the nipples down the rest of his life.

"It was devastating," Christine Gomez said.

Beltran was in a coma for several weeks before he found out the news. Along with his paralysis, Beltran was ventilator-dependent and unable to talk.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

It took several hospital and care facility stays the last four years before Beltran finally returned home in October 2019.

During that time, some skills people take for granted — breathing, talking and writing — he had to relearn.

When he came out of his coma, words seemed stuck in Beltran's head.

"It was like you know what you're trying to say, but nothing is coming out of your mouth," he said. "I would say the beginning of the letter and it would cut out."

At first he'd communicate by blinking — one blink for yes, two for no. He



ALEX HORVATH / THE CALIFORNIAN

would also try to mouth letters, but often times gave up, leading to more frustrations. With time, the sounds came back.

Breathing was another struggle. With one lung damaged, Beltran depended on his trach and ventilator to get enough air in. When he tried to breathe on his own, it felt like "drowning." He even got used to fainting.

He was filled with frustration, depression and anger.

During his two-year stay at Sierracare at the Lake, a subacute care facility in Tulare County for patients suffering medically complex injuries, Shannon Rojas, a licensed vocational nurse, encouraged him to take control.

When Beltran first entered the facility, Rojas said, he was "full of anger" and not always the nicest. He also couldn't cough out secretions on his own or wean himself off respiratory services.

"He wasn't accepting of his new condition and the way life would be for him," she said.

Rojas and fellow staff members tried to show Beltran they were there to support him, and after time, she noticed change. "I would tell him all the time, 'Prove me wrong, prove everyone wrong, show me you can do it,'" Rojas said.

Sure enough, he learned to do it on his own.

As Beltran healed, he gained strength and movement in his arms. His right hand, however, was severely damaged from a shoulder operation, and couldn't be used.

FINDING ART, FAMILY PEACE

An artist will tell you how valuable their hands are to their entire being. The 26-year-old always enjoyed art — drawing animals, mythical beings and celebrities with pencils or acrylic paints.

Turning to the creative outlet "makes me happy and gives me a sense of accomplishment," he explained. It also reminds him of his older brother, a talented artist of his own who died a few years ago from leukemia.



ABOVE: Jacob Emilio Beltran lives with his grandparents, Christine and Ben Gomez. Four years ago, in a random act of violence, Beltran was shot three times in the back, leaving him paralyzed and with one lung. The years that followed consisted of relearning how to breathe on his own, talk and write. Through it all, he continued to push himself, and is graduating with his high school diploma.

LEFT: Beltran exits his bedroom. He lives with his grandparents, Christine and Ben Gomez.

Rather than give that love away, Beltran learned how to use his left hand.

"I surprise myself sometimes," he said. "I'm just blown away with what I can do."

He thinks his artistry is even better with his left hand because he takes his time. Some recent works include koi fish, a portrait of his father, and a scary-identical take on the sculpture of Perseus holding the head of Medusa.

Being home with his grandparents also has allowed for more stability and time with loved ones. Almost daily there's a game of dominos going on with grandfather Ben, or gin rummy with grandmother Christine.

"When he beats me, I can't wait to go again," Ben said. Though there's trash-talking and sabotage involved, the time spent together is full of love.

Beltran's siblings — Gabriel, Xandria and Olivia — also help him get ready each day and with small tasks around the house.

"If I didn't have my family, I don't think I would have been able to get through it all," Beltran said. "I can see that for people who don't have family — it's a lot harder for them."

'I DID IT'

There was one more thing to cross off the list once he was home: graduating with his high school

diploma.

Beltran had about five credits left, and with a desire to finish and get out of the house more, he returned to Bakersfield Adult School.

This time around, "I enjoyed going to school, having my book on me, turning in my work," he said. The lowest score he received in his child development class was a B-minus.

"You can't give up on people," said Britton, who worked with Beltran again this year. "He didn't dictate the work, he did it himself. I might not have had the patience myself."

Christine Gomez remembers Beltran telling her a few

years ago, "Grandma, I'm never going to finish school. I'm letting you down."

When he completed his program in February, Christine Gomez said Beltran sent her a picture of him in his cap and gown. "I did it, Grandma. I'm going to cross stage," he said.

"He mentally wanted to do it and not give up," she said with pride.

This was all before the coronavirus pandemic forced the closure of Kern High School District schools. On Wednesday, the board of trustees approved holding scaled-down graduation ceremonies for all of the district's comprehensive and continuation schools for late

June. Bakersfield Adult School plans to hold its graduation in the fall.

Beltran will attend Bakersfield College either in the summer or fall, but he's still undecided on his major. He has a few options in mind — art and business — and eventually he'd like to become a motivational speaker and inspire others going through struggle.

"Life is very precious, and you have to make the most of it," he said. "I'm proud that I'm so focused on the positive outlook on life and sticking to those goals and accomplishing them."

Emma Sasic can be reached at 661-395-7392. Follow her on Twitter: @ema_sasic.

HOW THEY VOTED

MAJOR CONGRESSIONAL ROLL CALLS FOR THE WEEK ENDING MAY 22

VOTERAMA IN CONGRESS

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield
 ■ 4100 Empire Drive, Suite 150, Bakersfield, CA 93309
 ■ 661-327-3611 or 202-225-2915
 ■ kevinmccarthy.house.gov



T.J. Cox, D-Fresno
 ■ 2700 M St., Suite 250B, Bakersfield, CA 93301
 ■ 661-864-7736 or 202-225-4695
 ■ cox.house.gov

The House was in recess last week.

SENATE



Dianne Feinstein, D-San Francisco
 ■ 2500 Tulare St., Suite 4290, Fresno, CA 93721
 ■ 559-485-7430 or 202-224-3841
 ■ www.feinstein.senate.gov



Kamala Harris, D-Los Angeles
 ■ 2500 Tulare St., Suite 5290, Fresno, CA 93721
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CONFIRMING RATCLIFFE AS INTELLIGENCE CHIEF: On a party-line vote of 49-44, the Senate on May 21 confirmed Rep. John L. Ratcliffe, R-Texas, as the nation's top intelligence official. He becomes the sixth director of national intelligence (DNI) since the office was created after 9/11 to improve coordination among the 17 U.S. civilian and military intelligence agencies. Ratcliffe, 54, ardently defended President Donald Trump during House impeachment hearings last year, prompting Democratic senators to question whether he would independently overlook the American spy apparatus or, instead, shape intelligence to please the White House. But Republicans said his membership on the House Select Committee on Intelligence and background as a federal prosecutor qualify him to become DNI, and they pointed to his pledge of independence during Senate confirmation hearings. A yes vote was to confirm Ratcliffe

Feinstein: **NO** Harris: **NO**

CONFIRMING TRAINOR AS ELECTION COMMISSIONER: On a party-line vote of 49-43, the Senate on May 19 confirmed James E. Trainor III of Austin, Texas, for a seat on the Federal Election Commission, a post-Watergate panel charged with enforcing campaign finance laws in federal contests. The FEC discloses candidates' campaign finance data to the public, enforces rules for campaign contributions and spending and supervises the public funding of presidential elections. An attorney specializing in election law, Trainor advised President Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. He becomes the fourth member of the six-member FEC, giving it a quorum for conducting business for the first time since late August. A yes vote was to confirm Trainor.

Feinstein: **NO** Harris: **NO**

KEY VOTES AHEAD

The House will vote in the week of May 25 on extending the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, while the Senate will be in recess.

PUBLIC SAFETY

BPD arrests 3 burglary suspects

THE BAKERSFIELD CALIFORNIAN

The Bakersfield Police Department arrested three people early Friday morning after responding to a burglary alarm at Braun Electric, 3000 E. Belle Terrace. Sergio Ramirez, 43, Robert Menchaca, 27, and Jose Oregon, 37, were arrested on suspicion of grand theft, looting, conspiracy and vandalism, according to police. They've been booked into

the Kern County jail.

At about 3:15 a.m., the three suspects were seen on surveillance video in the business's yard. Officers surrounded the perimeter and could see the suspects underneath vehicles in the yard, police said in a news release. Officers entered the yard and took all three suspects into custody. The suspects removed eight catalytic converters

from vehicles at the business, police said.

Anyone with information is encouraged to call the BPD at 327-7111.

Rick Luis Bermudez was the man fatally struck by a car Wednesday night in the 300 block of Union Avenue, according to the Kern County coroner's office.

Bermudez, 56, died at the scene at 11:50 p.m., the coroner said in a news release.

The driver, William Chavez-Castro, 24, wasn't injured. He was unlicensed and driving under the influence of alcohol, the Bakersfield Police Department said. He was arrested and booked into the Kern County jail.

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