

Honorees of Santa Clara's 2021 Community Hero of the Year Awards

BY CYNTHIA CHENG

At the City of Santa Clara's virtual State of the City on June 30, the Santa Clara City Council presented the 2021 Community Hero of the Year Awards.

Mayor Lisa Gillmor gave the COVID-19 Citywide Hero of the Year Award to The River of Life Christian Church and Foundation.

"Ever since COVID-19 hit our community, the River of Life's Foundation and its dedicated volunteers rolled up their sleeves and opened their hearts and through their food pantry, these incredible volunteers served thousands upon thousands of our community's neediest citizens," Gillmor said. "They also made sure that essential household products and hygiene supplies were available. They even distributed school supplies for students learning from home."

"Our food pantry doors were consistently open throughout the pandemic," said Sam Loh, President of the River of Life Foundation. "We would not have accomplished this without the many brave volunteers sacrificing their time, energy and health to come out to serve the people in our community."

Councilmember Kathy Watanabe gave the District 1 COVID-19 Hero of the Year Award to Dr. Nira Singh, Director of Behavior Health at AACI (Asian Americans for Community Involvement).

According to Singh, AACI coordinated community COVID-19 testing and vaccination events, delivered meals and resources to isolated older adults and offered shelter-



in-place kits to families in need. Also, the organization has provided safe housing and support to survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking.

Vice Mayor Raj Chahal gave the District 2 COVID-19 Hero of the Year Award to Mahesh Nihalani, Community Director of Priya Living.

"The pandemic created a need in the community which I answered by getting together all our seniors to stitch face masks, knit beanie caps and scarves, contribute toward [feeding the homeless], do yoga, meditation and other fun and wellness programs over Zoom, which even other seniors could participate in," Nihalani said. "I'm happy to say that we have no cases of COVID at all."

Councilmember Karen Hardy gave the District 3 COVID-19 Hero of the

Year Award to Raisa Galat, a receptionist at Pacific Gardens Assisted Living and Memory Support Community. Galat caught COVID-19 and has recovered from it.

"The pandemic created a need in the community which I felt compelled to answer by spreading awareness and sharing my story," Galat said. "I was in the hospital for a couple of months and it was a difficult time. I want to encourage people who have COVID to stay positive and think about things being okay and getting back to normal."

Councilmember Kevin Park gave the District 4 COVID-19 Hero of the Year Award to Santa Clara residents Tom and Martha Taylor. According to Park, during the pandemic, this couple has connected neighbors by hosting virtual game and talk nights, organizing donations and deliver-

ies of food and flowers, keeping track of neighbors in need and sending out messages of where to go for toilet paper and other necessities.

"The pandemic created a need in the community which we answered by helping our neighbors and encouraging good neighboring," Tom Taylor said.

Councilmember Suds Jain gave the District 5 COVID-19 Hero of the Year Award to Jennifer You, owner of YogaSix Santa Clara.

"Our community came together to help others in need by distributing groceries to local families, raising money to stop Asian hate and sending oxygen and COVID supplies to India," said You, who also explained that her studio, during the pandemic, has offered a full schedule of socially distanced outdoor yoga classes in the park.

Councilmember Anthony Becker gave the District 6 COVID-19 Hero of the Year Award to Lisa Chung and the restaurant she owns, China Delight.

"I love the Santa Clara community," Chung said. "I've been operating China Delight since 1996. In 2016, I lost the lease on my restaurant on Homestead so I moved my restaurant to the San Jose and Cupertino area. Then I planned to move the restaurant to where By Th' Bucket was but there was a fire there in July 2018. So I couldn't move my restaurant there anymore. Then the owner of a Chinese restaurant called 456 sold their business. We took the space. Now this is where China Delight is. Someday I might like to move our restaurant to the space where By Th' Bucket is when I get a permit."

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how to fill positions," she said. "We have a civil service process which is well-known and followed and adhered to within the organization. Under the City Charter I have the appointment ... and hiring authority.

"It has not been familiar to me in my near 30 years of experience that a Council gets involved in that or makes those types of motions," she continued. "Without my having a legal opinion on this, those are the first things that come to mind."

"I don't understand why we would not simply state that we would try to be as open as possible in a hiring process and instead we have a lot of pushback on the charter, [on] Councilmanic interference," said Council Member Kevin Park.

This week Santana told The Weekly that the City is recruiting for the Assistant Director job and has hired a recruiting firm. "The position has been posted on their website as well as the City's website. Interviews are tentatively scheduled for mid-August," Santana said.

Because the Assistant Director job wasn't advertised when it was discussed at the Council meeting, and Santana seemed to be resistant to opening the job up, led

some City Hall insiders to suggest that the job was being tailored for Brilliot.

With a Masters in Urban Planning, Brilliot came to Santa Clara from San José in 2018 after working for that city for nine years; a move that boosted her salary from \$142,000 to \$154,000; a \$12,000 increase. She currently heads the City's planning and code enforcement operations. In San José she was interim Director of Planning and a business development specialist recruiting new businesses to San José.

In 2019, she got a \$25,000 raise, bringing her to \$183,000 — 8th highest paid planning manager in California in 2019. That year she also received a \$9,100 merit increase — bringing her salary to upwards of \$191,000, with \$81,000 in benefits.

Then in 2021 came the title change to Assistant to the City Manager and the raise that brought Brilliot's salary to \$227,000. This is the top of the salary range for this job and makes her the highest paid Assistant to the City Manager in California (Santa Clara now holds the top three spots in the state for this job). Brilliot's new job title hasn't been publicly announced.

All told, the raises added up to \$72,000 — 51 percent — in a period of three years.

Santana says that the raises are consis-

tent with the job responsibilities. "Her position was realigned to more closely match the duties that she is performing, as well as assisting the City Manager's Office with special projects," Santana told The Weekly.

Brilliot "continues to oversee concurrently all of Planning Manager duties, as well as the additional management duties and special projects," Santana said. "As a represented employee, her duties should match her classification and compensation, in compliance with pay equity State laws."

However, the inconsistencies in this history remain — a necessary job that is nonetheless not included in the budget published three weeks later, a seeming about-face about how the job was to be filled, and a job reassignment to the top of the pay grade during a budget crisis.

Data Show Santa Clara Compensation Is Competitive

At the May 7 Council meeting, Santana spent almost as much time lobbying for a high salary for the Assistant Director job as she did for the job itself.

"We have had some problems attracting talent, as development has increased over the last years in the region... we're trending about a 50 percent vacancy rate...

We will be back likely before the end of the year to make corrections to make this [City a] more attractive employer.

Santana has been complaining that Santa Clara's compensation is "uncompetitive" since she arrived in 2017 with a bevy of her former colleagues — all of whom received hefty increases to come to Santa Clara.

But the pay for the assistant planning/community development director in neighboring cities shows that Santa Clara's compensation for this job is not only competitive but at the top of the pay scale.

San José's top paid assistant planning director makes \$232,000 with \$59,000 in benefits. Mountain View's Assistant Community Development Director makes \$200,000 and \$56,000 in benefits. Sunnyvale's Assistant Community Development Director makes \$204,000 with \$64,000 in benefits.

Santana herself was the third highest compensated city manager in California last year, surpassed only by two city managers that retired with big lump sum payments.

Sources: PublicPay.ca.gov, TransparentCalifornia.com, SantaClaraCA.gov. Numbers are rounded.