

**SEAL BEACH**



JEFF GRITCHEN — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Elizabeth Levingston, 8, center, are with, clockwise, Amelia Butler, 8, Samantha Meleg, Traci Morales and Elijah Levingston. A large wave swept Elizabeth out to sea, but a man made a dramatic rescue of the youth and women.

# Mystery 'cowboy' saves women, child who got sucked into surf

Wearing jeans and a flannel shirt, the man rescues group caught in a riptide

By Laylan Connelly  
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The fast-thinking man was wearing tight jeans and a button-up red-and-blue flannel shirt, drenched after he jumped into the wild waves.

He was wearing cowboy boots, Samantha Meleg thinks, but everything happened so fast she can't be sure.

But one thing she knows to be true is that if that mystery man hadn't acted

fast late Sunday afternoon, a young girl, and possibly Meleg, would have drowned in waters off Seal Beach.

"I don't think he realized he literally saved our lives," Meleg said Monday, still shaken after the incident that could have turned a pleasant day at the beach into a deadly one.

Meleg and her daughter, Amelia Butler, 8, along with family friends Elizabeth Levingston, 8, brother Elijah, 10, and their mom, Traci Morales, were all en-

joying the sunny day near the south side of the pier by the Anaheim Bay entrance, an area away from the bigger crowds nearer the pier.

The kids are all strong swimmers, "guppies," Meleg calls them. They splashed in the shallows.

The moms never took their eyes off their children and stood 500 feet away, chatting about wanting to spend more time at the beach this summer.

Suddenly, a big wave came and, in a blink, swept Elizabeth Levingston — "Izzy" — into the sea.

The two other kids started toward the water to grab her but quickly real-

ized the waves were beyond their ability and screamed for help.

"If the kids would have gone after her, we would have lost all the kids," said Meleg, who works for a medical billing company in Redondo Beach. "The kids did the right thing — they knew it was going to be too much. They ran back and screamed at the top of their lungs."

By the time the moms reached the water's edge, a stranger had jumped into the ocean to grab Izzy. The moms jumped in, too, and Meleg was able to grab the girl's arm from the man

**RESCUE » PAGE 4**

**BEACHES**

# Power volleyball couple donates 25 new nets to Huntington Beach

Four-time Olympic medalist and her husband seek to advance the sport

By Laylan Connelly  
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It all started on the sand in Huntington Beach.

Casey Jennings pointed to the volleyball court where, in 2001, he first met and scrimmaged against his now-wife, Kerri Walsh Jennings, who at the time was nervously trying out to see if she was a fit alongside Misty May-Treanor.

Of course, three Olympic gold and one bronze medals later, Walsh Jennings and May-Treanor were undoubtedly a match. As were Jennings and Walsh Jennings — three kids later — both of whom have built stellar careers advancing the sport.

The volleyball power couple, who live in Manhattan Beach, were in Huntington Beach on Tuesday, giving back to the sport they've



MARK RIGHTMIRE — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Wilson Bradley Mays, 8, left, of San Juan Capistrano helps Casey Jennings and Olympic gold medalist Kerri Walsh Jennings during a ribbon-cutting ceremony Tuesday.

built their lives around. They were hosting a ribbon-cutting for 25 new nets on courts surrounding the pier through their lifestyle brand p1440, with hopes of inspiring the next generation of volleyball players to live their

dreams. The p1440 brand is many things, but its primary purpose is to remind people to live every 1,440 minutes — a complete day — to the fullest. P1440 launched in 2018

with three fitness and lifestyle festivals — in San Jose, Las Vegas and Huntington Beach — bringing with it volleyball entertainment and tournaments, clinics, fitness challenges and workshops.

**VOLLEYBALL » PAGE 4**

**PLANNED GRAVEYARD**

# Cemetery will have space for allied forces

Orange County could be first to offer grounds to Korean, Vietnamese vets

By Alicia Robinson  
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A cemetery Orange County officials want to build using sprawling land on Anaheim's eastern end could make history, with space included for those who fought alongside American forces in Vietnam and Korea.

The soldiers who supported the U.S. military were struggling for freedom and democracy, and they should be afforded respect, said county Supervisor Andrew Do, who led supervisors on Tuesday in designating 10 percent of the future cemetery toward a final resting place for members of the military or government of allied forces.

"It was more of a universal conflict against communism," Do said. "We fought together, not just as Americans and Vietnamese, but as fellow patriots."

The county is transferring 283 acres near the junction of the 91 and 241 freeways to the Orange County Cemetery District; it will be the fourth cemetery in the district and will alleviate a pressing shortage of public burial space.

A section of the cemetery was already planned for American military vet-

erans.

Do said he's unaware of any military cemetery in the country that honors allied troops, so Orange County's could be the first.

"This cemetery will greatly commemorate the Korea-U.S. relationship and will be a comfort to our Korean veterans," said James Lee, president of the Korean Veterans Association's Southwest Region. He was speaking in Korean. "We are proud to lay to rest in the United States as a Korean veteran."

Orange County is home to more than 750 Korean veterans who fought in the Korean or Vietnam wars, Lee said. Some have considered returning to South Korea to be buried in the country's national cemeteries, but many want to stay here close to their families.

"This is great news for our veterans," Lee said.

An initial phase of 10 acres with buildings for administration, cremations and other services would cost an estimated \$25 million, Do said.

Cemetery district General Manager Tim Deutsch said he hopes to break ground on the civilian portion within five years.

The site is too close to Riverside National Cemetery to qualify for federal funding.

**CEMETERY » PAGE 5**

**BOLSA CHICA**

# Wetlands team takes battle against invasive plants to the beach

Stewards work to keep seeds from nonnative plants in dunes from blowing into habitat

By Martin Wisckol  
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Conservationists and weekend volunteers have toiled in the Bolsa Chica Wetlands for years, weeding out invasive plants and replanting native vegetation that has been squeezed out by the invaders.

Those native plants are key to creating a habitat — with its attendant bird food of bugs and lizards — that has made the wetlands in Huntington Beach a thriving destination for more than 200 types of birds, including several endangered and threatened species.

Now, these wildlife custodians are expand-

ing their botanical battle across Pacific Coast Highway to the sand dunes of Bolsa Chica State Beach.

After all, no matter how many enemy plants are removed from the wetlands, ocean winds will carry more seeds from the non-native plants growing in the dunes. Just as beach trash blows across PCH into the wetlands, so do the seeds of invasive plants like the mustard plant variant known as the sea rocket.

"We're able to expand and address the connectivity between these habitats because of the success we've had in the wetlands," said Grace Adams, executive director of the Bolsa Chica Conservancy for the past 16 years.

**PLANT » PAGE 4**

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# Rescue

FROM PAGE 3

and toss the child toward the shoreline, where the other two children were able to reach Izzy and pull her to safety.

But the moms soon knew they, too, were in need of help.

"We were just getting hit, wave after wave," Meleg recounted. "There was no swimming. We weren't in water any deeper than our waist. But the waves just kept hitting us. The rip-

tide was pulling the water from under us. We couldn't stand up."

## Lessons learned

The man in the flannel shirt helped pull the two women out, their legs bleeding and bruised from the pounding waves and getting tossed around on the sand.

They hugged the stranger but were too concerned with how the kids were doing to talk much with him before he was gone.

Meleg said the man had a shaved head. He was skinny and tall — just

above 6 foot. She thinks his name was David, or Daniel, but with all the commotion, she's not certain. The woman he was with was petite, about 5 foot 5, wearing a big gray jacket.

"That's all we know," Meleg said. But she said she has a message for the man.

"You saved our daughter's life," Meleg said of Izzy, who she said is like family. "We want to replace everything that was ruined. Without you, we would have lost our kid."

Meleg said she'll take away valuable lessons from the day.

"If the waves are big, they aren't going in the water. If it looks like a washer machine, your kid will be swept out, and you're not going to be able to help them. ... It doesn't matter how well you watch your children. We never took our eyes off our children. Not once."

Another lesson is something lifeguards echo regularly to keep beachgoers safe: Always swim near — and check in with — lifeguards.

"We don't go where there's not a lifeguard after this," Meleg said.

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# Plant

FROM PAGE 3

Helping make the expanded effort possible is the growth in volunteers and in the frequency of cleanup and restoration projects. Adams estimated more than 4,000 people chip in for volunteer projects annually.

In addition to public volunteer work periods from 9 a.m. to noon on the second Sunday and last Saturday of each month, companies and other organizations are increasingly signing up for their own public service days. Participants include Southern California Gas, the Pacific Asian Volunteer

Association and the Coast Guard, Adams said.

## Improved surroundings

The first target at the state beach is 10,000 square feet southwest of the intersection of Pacific Coast Highway and Warner Avenue, on the inland side of the beach trail.

On Feb. 16, about 45 volunteers, conservancy staff and state parks workers joined in to replace the sea rockets, ice plant and their ilk with seven types of native plants, including the insect-friendly California sunflower, California buckwheat and red sand verben. A second session open to the public was held Saturday, and the job is expected to

be completed in May during a Boeing public service day.

Adams said that summer brings a break to the planting season but that the conservancy is looking forward to continuing its joint effort with the state parks workers in the fall.

The conservancy propagates about half of the plants, with the Surf City Rotary pitching in \$900 to buy the rest. The entire project will cost \$40,000 funded by grants and private donations, Adams said.

Meanwhile, a related effort is underway on a bluff just beyond the south end of the wetlands on 10 acres of the Harriett Wieder Regional Park, which is much more densely overrun with

invasive plants than the dunes.

That restoration project is funded by \$475,000 from the Orange County Transportation Authority as mitigation for environmental damages caused by road projects. The conservancy is managing the work as part of a five-year contract with OCTA that began in 2016.

Among the wetlands beneficiaries are the federally endangered Ridgway's rail, which likes to hide in the native cordgrass, and the state endangered Belding's Savannah sparrow, Adams said. Two other rare birds are thriving in the wetlands, the least tern and the snowy plover, though both are partial to sandy habitats.

# Volleyball

FROM PAGE 3

Part of the intent of the brand is to make beach volleyball a more livable career choice.

When the Olympics aren't happening, it's hard to make a living as a pro, Walsh Jennings said in a past interview.

Top-level volleyball players take home an estimated \$36,000 a year — pennies compared to other competitive sports such as basketball, baseball and football.

So Walsh Jennings and her husband wanted to create a platform to help the top athletes be seen throughout

the year, as well as a way for up-and-coming volleyball players to showcase their skills.

They both still compete regularly, Jennings domestically and Walsh Jennings on the international circuit.

"It feels really good to be still playing and getting involved in the youth," Jennings said.

He said Huntington Beach is the place that holds the most sentiment for him, not just because it's where he met his future wife, but also because it's the "last frontier" for beach volleyball, one of the few places where someone can come down and join an impromptu pickup game.

"That doesn't happen any-

more," he said. "But you can come to Huntington Beach, you can still show up, like I did in 1993, and not know one person and walk up to a court. That's how I started."

P1440 is sponsoring a developmental team that will practice on the courts, a chance for athletes between college and professional careers to get coaching for free.

Through the p1440 app, free workshops and coaching are available to anyone interested in advancing in the sport.

On Tuesday, Walsh Jennings was busy signing autographs through the morning for fans excited to get a glimpse of the gold medalist.

"It warms my heart, it's so special," she said of the

people who stood in line to meet her.

Linda Cirillo, in town from Indiana for her 70th birthday, lined up to get an autograph for her college volleyball-playing niece, Maria Rasch.

"She won't even know what to say, she will probably just go crazy," Cirillo said. "And maybe it will encourage her to continue with her volleyball."

Walsh Jennings said she hopes the new black p1440 nets will inspire anyone to come down and play.

"This is just a simple but really powerful gesture," she said of the nets. "We want to honor this (city) first, because this is where it all started."

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