

PUTTING THE CHICANA INTO CHICANO PARK

Women are the primary leaders and guardians of the iconic National Heritage Site

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Photo By Yanelli Zavina Robles / Staff



COMMUNITY NEEDS GOVERNING BOARD TO WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT STUDENTS, EDITORIAL PAGE 12

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AN ACP HALL OF FAME NEWSPAPER

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A NATIONAL PACEMAKER AWARD NEWSPAPER

HONORARY DEGREE TO JOURNALISM ACTIVIST McCORMICK

Founded SD Assn. of Black Journalists, 'Pro for a Day'

BY JULIO RODRIGUEZ

When Jerry McCormick was 10 and growing up in South Carolina, he and a friend watched the film "Superman." It wasn't the superhero that caught his attention, but the fearless reporter who pursued the truth no matter the cost.



JERRY McCORMICK

"Boys my age wanted to be Superman. I wanted to be Lois Lane," he said. "She got to go on all these adventures and write stories. That was when I knew what I wanted to do."

Super journalist McCormick will become Southwestern College's 46th Honorary Degree recipient at this year's commencement for his many contributions to journalism and education, including co-founding the San Diego Association of Black Journalists. During his 30-plus years as a professional he has gone on countless adventures and some misadventures. He has faced discrimination, toxic work environments and a layoff, yet he has thrived. So have thousands of journalism students he has influenced.

McCORMICK • PG 3

AS SWC READING LEVELS DROP, SUPPORT SYSTEM WITHERS AWAY

BY DIEGO HIGUERA

America is facing another pandemic—one that impacts half its student population. High school and college students struggle to read.

Reading – the foundation of learning and critical thinking – is a skill too many Southwestern College students do not do well.

It is a national problem complicated in the borderlands by a polylingual population and a large number of immigrant students for whom English is not their first language. These students can learn to read but may have fallen behind due to their life circumstances, said Southwestern College Professor of Reading Dr. Sylvia Garcia Navarrete.

Research by the ACT Center for Impact and Learning concludes that half of America's high school graduates do not read at college

READING • PG 9



Photo By Josh Whitehead / Staff

FAITH-BASED GROUPS ON THE MARCH

A PRAYER FOR THE MIGRANTS

Making peace takes courage, especially during times of turmoil and mistrust. San Diego faith leaders called upon people of the region to fight for decency, fairness and democracy even though it may seem those values have fallen out of vogue. People from the Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities joined non-believers to seek humane treatment of migrants. One minister said it required a leap of faith to seek light when all seemed dark. Thousands of citizens of the borderlands seemed willing to take the leap.

STUDENTS, LIBRARIANS SPEAK OUT ABOUT RATS

Rodents are destroying telemedia equipment, books, periodicals and students' peace of mind

BY TONI GIBSON, DIEGO HIGUERA, VALERYAH LARA-URREA, PIA MARIA FLORES PALACIOS, YANELLI ZAVINA ROBLES, JOSHUA WHITEHEAD, ZEKE WATSON AND DIRA MARIE WONG

One of nature's most resourceful animals has moved into one of the college's greatest resources.

Rats have occupied the Learning Resource Center and an array of frustrated college employees and students insist college leaders have not done enough to stem the invasion. Administrators acknowledge that it is a frustrating situation, but claim they are addressing the problem.

College employees said rats have destroyed expensive film equipment and cables, books, periodicals and other academic resources housed in the library-FTMA complex. Film Professor Mark Sisson said rats have been in the FTMA area for a full year and he has heard them in the walls and ceiling. He said he began making service requests for pest control in August, but never personally saw exterminators until after the New Year.

"I didn't know what they were doing or why they were here, but I think I caught one of them saying something (about rats) and I realized, 'Oh, you guys are here for the rats,'" he said. "They said yes."

The Learning Resource Center (Building 64) is a \$17 million complex that includes the main library, the facilities and studios of Film, Television and Media Arts (FTMA), Multimedia Services, Professional Development, Distance Education, Online Learning Center, tutoring, faculty offices and conference rooms. Confirmed sightings of rats, droppings or urine have occurred in the main floors of the library, FTMA equipment checkout basement and other rooms in the Learning Resource Center complex.

FTMA staffers said they began reporting the infestation in October, but that rats likely started moving in during the summer when the adjacent student center construction project displaced rats and other animals. Rat populations and damage increased

RATS • PG 8

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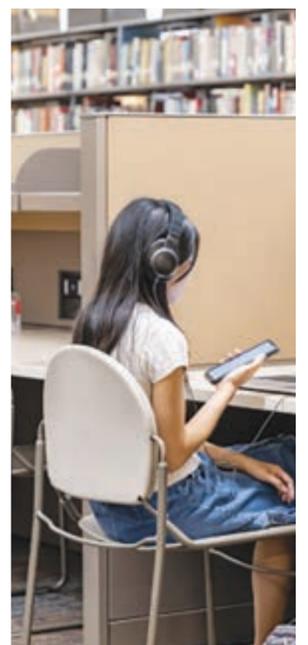


Photo Courtesy of SWC Instagram

RATS ARE AT HOME IN THE LIBRARY

College staff and students say they began noticing rats and mice in the Learning Resource Center complex in August. College leaders have contracted at least one pest control company, but the problem continues. There have been confirmed rat sightings well into May.

RATS

• CONT FROM PG 1

Learning Resource Center has struggled with damage by rodents all year say frustrated employees

throughout the fall semester, the staffers said, despite intervention by pest control professionals.

FTMA employees said they were dismayed to find “substantial damage” to “XLR cables, wires, bags and (a range of) equipment.” They also found substantial holes in the ceiling of the green room made by rats.

Staff and students who work in the FTMA equipment checkout area said rats also damaged their own personal equipment and possessions – often in a matter of hours. Employees said rats damaged their personal equipment bags, in-ear audio monitors, power cables and other gear. Employees indicated that they were unaware of any total estimates of damage, but said it was likely extensive. Cables can cost \$70 - \$150, monitors generally cost \$150 each and padded equipment bags can run more than \$100. Dozens of items may have been damaged, said a senior college employee.

Rats also urinated on college and personal equipment, according to employees, and rat droppings “were, like, practically everywhere.”

“It was gross,” said an FTMA worker. “Just knowing that rats were in your stuff really sucks. I tossed my ear monitors.”

“I didn’t know it was going to turn into such a big thing,” said a college employee in the FTMA area.

SCRATCHING OVERHEAD

FTMA employees and Sisson said rats can be heard racing around in the ceilings throughout the day and into the evening.

“It is kind of disconcerting to think about rats running around over your head all day and what they may be doing up there,” said a senior college employee.

Also overhead is the main library, which employees like Library Chair Margaret Drehobl said has been struggling with rats. Drehobl declined to speak on the record but spoke at a SCEA union meeting about the problem and sought additional help to manage the invaders.

Drehobl and other campus librarians confirmed that rats had chewed on or urinated on academic books each valued at between \$40 - \$100, but said they were not yet able to say conclusively how many books or periodicals were affected. Any books with evidence of rat contact were removed from circulation, they said.

Rat droppings have been found on bookshelves, student workstations and on the carpets throughout the library, but particularly along the walls. One corner along the northeastern wall had a strong odor of rodent urine like an unkempt hamster cage, though a few days later the area had been cleaned and smelled like disinfectant.

Replacing the carpet – if necessary – could be very expensive, according to a maintenance employee who asked that his name not be used. The library is 84,306 square feet and replacement of each square foot of carpeting would average almost \$7, said the employee. That could pencil out to about \$350,000, said the employee.

Most students and employees seem to agree that by no means is the Southwestern College library filthy, but that it could be cleaner.

“I think we needed a quicker, how shall I say?, more robust early response by the administration,” said a library employee who asked that their name not be used due to fear of retaliation.

PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH A RAT

Southwestern College student Ines Cervantes said she was studying in the library in April when a rat ran across her foot.

“The library was quiet and still when all of the sudden I felt something huge run across my shoe,” she said. “It felt heavy like an animal ran past and I thought I felt a tail slip past my foot and I froze. I was terrified. I didn’t even scream. I just knew I had to get out of there fast. I knew right away that a rat had just run across my foot.”

Cervantes said she had always enjoyed the library and its staff, but did not plan to return “unless I really have to.”



Courtesy Image

A TASTE FOR LIBRARY BOOKS—Rats and mice in the main library have caused incalculable damage to books, periodicals and equipment by chewing or urinating on them, according to staff. Some students say they will not return to the library until the rodents have been eliminated.

“I feel disgust towards this happening and the thought that rats are in our library,” she said. “The fact that an animal that is known for carrying diseases is roaming the library (is disconcerting). (I am) scared and nervous to even go back to the library.”

Other students reported seeing rats, but none wanted to speak on the record for fear of being banned from the library. (Library employees said students would not be banned from the library were they to talk to journalists about rats.) One student said she used to like the study rooms with large, sunlit windows along the perimeter of the library, but she said rats seem to favor those areas. She said she still uses the library daily but has moved to study cubicles in the interior in hopes of minimizing the chances of encountering a rat.

A UNION ISSUE

Southwestern College faculty union officer Eric Maag, a professor of communication and one of the coaches of the college’s champion debate team, acknowledged that “concerns about rats” have been brought to the union. He said the SCEA Grievance Committee is engaged in discussions with college administration about concerns employees have about rats and ways to address the problem.

“We are in contact with the district

and our administration is aware of our concerns about rats,” Maag said. “We have had members of the faculty express concerns. We are currently working together (with administration) to try to get to a solution.”

Maag said he could not discuss details of the grievance proceedings while they are ongoing. Union President Candice Taffolla-Schreiber declined to answer questions about rats due to the ongoing meetings with administration.

Classified union president Silvia Nogales said the rats present a health risk to custodians and classified staff. The situation also underscores an ongoing CSEA assertion that the college district is not moving fast enough to replace employment vacancies, particularly among custodial and grounds crews that could have helped to prevent or minimize a rat infestation.

Many library employees agreed that rats are drawn to their area due to its shelter and abundant food from crumbs left by snacking students. Without regular vacuuming, these crumbs accumulate in the carpets. Deep cleaning of the library on a regular basis would help lessen the problem, said a library staff member, but custodial staff for the Chula Vista campus only performs minimal cleaning.

“There is no cleaning of the surfaces,”

said one library staff member. “No carpet cleaning on a regular basis, just bathrooms and garbage. That’s it. That’s all they have time for.”

Another employee said the custodial staff is too small and is overworked.

“We know (the rats are) not the custodians’ fault,” said the employee. “It’s not them. They don’t have time to do it because their plate is so full. They’re like ‘I can only do the minimal here and here.’”

Nogales has addressed the governing board about what she described as classified employee shortages and the redirection of funding to administrative positions and new programs. She said the college needs to “reprioritize the care of facilities.”

“We are not filling vacancies fast enough and the college is suffering,” she said. “When we don’t have enough custodians our college is not adequately cleaned and there are ramifications to that. We are letting the basics suffer. We need to get back to the basics like providing a clean, healthy campus environment for students, employees and the community.”

A chorus of classified employees and faculty have spoken at recent governing board meetings about the same topic. Long-time Southwestern College employees like Elizabeth Valdez, Hilda Quintero, Erik Duke, Enrique Gonzalez, Diane Palmer,

April Brenner and Amy Bosler have all appealed to the board to replace vacancies and fund classified positions for new buildings coming online. Nogales said the college needs 12 new custodians. The board authorized the hiring of five, though Maag said he only knows of one recent custodial hire.

College President Dr. Mark Sanchez has said the college would like to eventually hire more classified employees, but that the process takes time and there have been insufficient applications.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR RAT CLEANUP?

Health agencies like the Center for Disease Control consider rat droppings and urine to be akin to hazardous materials that need to be attended to with great care and proper protective equipment – preferably by professionals. Untrained persons cleaning up after rats risk infection with serious diseases, according to the San Diego County Department of Environmental Health and Quality.

“Rats can spread disease, contaminate food and cause costly structural damage,” according to the agency website.

They are also known carriers of viruses and parasites, including the bubonic plague, rat-bite fever, tapeworms, and -- in rare cases -- hantavirus, the disease that killed Betsy Arakawa, the concert pianist married to actor Gene Hackman.

The Center for Disease Control urges workers who clean up rodent waste as part of their usual work responsibilities to contact either their state or local health department, their local or state occupational safety and health authority (OSHA), or the CDC for information about preventing rodent-borne diseases.

Southwestern College custodians, classified employees and faculty have reported that they alone have been responsible for cleaning up rodent droppings in the Learning Resource Center complex. None said they were given proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) prior to their clean-up activities. Maag said he has personally removed a dead rat from an area occupied by students.

Proper clean-up, according to the CDC, requires rubber gloves, specialized disinfectants and multiple garbage bags, all of which should be immediately disposed of, separate from normal garbage. All PPE should be properly disinfected upon completion of any waste clean-up.

Chula Vista medical professionals said rodents are serious public health threats. Doctors said rats can carry leptospirosis and salmonella. Leptospirosis can be contracted from the urine of infected animals or by consuming water or food contaminated with the urine. Symptoms include high fever, headache, bleeding, muscle aches, chills, red eyes and vomiting. Acute cases can be fatal.

Salmonella symptoms include stomach cramps, fever and diarrhea. Symptoms can last seven days and lead to more serious infections.

WORKING FOR A SOLUTION

Senior college leaders said they are taking active steps to resolve the problem. Chief of Staff Zaneta Encarnacion said multiple stakeholders and outside professionals are involved.

“The district’s facilities team worked closely with library faculty and staff, as well as external pest control experts, to address the situation,” she said.

Specific measures include “enhanced pest management efforts,” closer surveillance of food in the library and lidded trash cans inside the building, said Encarnacion. She said faculty and staff are engaged in “open communication” necessary “to help conserve a safe and clean environment on campus.”

“At this time, we believe the steps taken have effectively resolved the concern,” she said.

Some library and FTMA staff said they thought it was too early to declare victory over rats and the situation is not resolved.

Maag said talks with college administrators are ongoing.

“There are things I wish, in hindsight, were handled differently, but I can say for sure no one wants rats in our buildings,” he said. “I hope we can continue to have productive conversations and take decisive action to ensure that all employees and students feel safe at Southwestern College.”