

VOLUNTEER NOTES

Trio Named Star Students

Three county interns on the Election Department's Student Elections Ambassador Program (SEAP) team have been named Star Students by the online news organization Patch for their leadership on SEAP's steering committee.

Marinterns **Sophia Lopez**, **Barry Liu**, and **Tessa Harrell** liaise with Elections Department staff, the Marin Office of Education, and the League of Women Voters to support youth education about voting and promote voter registration.

The three high school seniors engage their 40-plus fellow Marinterns ambassadors by designing nonpartisan recruitment ads, managing social media, planning all-student meetings, organizing a Youth Town Hall, and more.

Beyond SEAP leadership, Sophia participates in track and field, founded a friendship club, and works part-time. Barry volunteers to support mental health awareness and substance use prevention and is on his school's golf team. Tessa is senior class president, raised more than \$15,000 for her class, and works part-time in a restaurant.

Holiday

County offices will be closed Friday, June 19, for Juneteenth.



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Search and Rescue Leader Is County's Volunteer of the Year

By Scott Harrop

It all started when Volunteer of the Year **Gideon Bernstein**'s daughters took an interest in horses. They arranged to volunteer at Horse Hill Preserve, the Mill Valley pasture where owners allow their horses to roam free. While tending to the horses, they met Marin County Parks volunteer **Robert Eichstadt**. Robert suggested one of Gideon's teen daughters, June, look into volunteering for Marin Search and Rescue (SAR), and his pitch intrigued Gideon, too.

At first it seemed like too much of a time commitment. Gideon and his wife Nancy, both in finance, had two other daughters to care for. But Nancy was supportive, noting that if Gideon and June joined SAR together it would

count as family time.

A New York native, Gideon developed a love for the outdoors at summer camp in the Adirondacks. After attending Haverford College in Pennsylvania and earning an MBA from the University of Virginia, he worked at Merrill Lynch before moving to San Francisco in 2004.



Gideon Bernstein

PHOTO BY LAINE HENDRICKS

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Intern of the Year Plans Career in Law

By Natalie Dybeck



Max Gehm

Each year internship supervisors across County of Marin departments nominate outstanding interns for the coveted title of Intern of the Year. This year the recognition goes to **Max Gehm**, a legal intern and a former writer intern with this newsletter.

As an undergrad, Max interned with the Human Resources Department as a *MarinfoNOW* writer, honing his writing skills and learning about editing from MarinShares volunteer writing coach **Ed Remitz**. Max's articles featured fellow interns and volunteers, highlighting their service to the county.

After graduating San Diego State last year, Max returned to Marin to seek an opportunity that aligned with his goals in law and public service. "I realized that in my ideal career I would work to solve world issues, namely inequality and injustice," said Max. "I wanted to contribute to my community and immerse myself in a legal environment before committing to law school."

Max began interning with the Marin County Public Defender's Office in

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PHOTO BY DOUG KAYE

Intern of the Year Plans Career in Law

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May 2025, serving alongside staff attorneys. Much of his focus was on cases under the California Racial Justice Act (CRJA), which allows defendants to challenge criminal convictions or sentences by showing that racial bias impacted their case. He learned to review case files and transcripts for evidence of bias, draft memoranda, and compile data from homicide cases dating back to the 1980s.

One meaningful experience for Max was visiting Solano State Prison to meet with a client serving a life-without-parole sentence. “It was incredibly profound,” said Max. “He was hilarious, personable, and remarkably positive despite his situation. He expressed how happy he was that his codefendant—his younger brother—had been released earlier that year. This really stayed with me because he himself is serving the rest of his life in prison for the same crime. It reminded me of the humanity within the situation, the inhumanity of prison and confinement, and the adaptability of human beings.”

Beyond his CRJA interests, Max assisted misdemeanor and felony attorneys while helping clients navigate court-ordered diversion programs. He communicated with clients in both English and Spanish



Intern of the Year Max Gehm, on screen, is congratulated by, left to right, Board of Supervisors President Eric Lucan, Public Defender David Sutton, his mother, Lisa Gehm, his father, Felix Gehm, and Supervisors Dennis Rodoni and Brian Colbert.

by phone, text, and email, helping to explain legal requirements. “I feel like I made a real impact in getting their cases dismissed,” said Max. “Many of our clients, especially monolingual Spanish-speaking and elderly clients, have difficulty understanding confusing terms and procedures. In my role, I helped explain how to complete programs and found community service opportunities on behalf of clients.”

Max’s supervisor, Deputy Public Defender **Gina Vanni**, praised Max’s dedication and work ethic. “Max is such an asset,” she said. “He goes above and beyond for our clients and approaches each task with care, thoughtfulness, and humility.”

Max said the legal internship both prepared him for and confirmed his

desire to pursue law school. “From my first day with the Public Defender’s Office, I felt akin to my coworkers in our perception of the world and our aspirations in a way I had never felt before,” he said.

Max has been accepted to the University of Texas Law School.

This summer he plans to continue building his Spanish skills, which he strengthened during

a visit to Nicaragua and Costa Rica last month.

The Board of Supervisors honored Max at a recognition ceremony on May 18, while he was traveling solo in Central America. He took part from Costa Rica via Zoom. Max thanked Marinterns Coordinator **Joy Fossett** for supporting his newsletter role and attorneys **Dominik Taylor**, Gina Vanni, and their colleagues for a warm welcome and a “crash course...in legal terminology.”

Public Defender **David Sutton** and Human Resources Director **Christina Cramer** praised Max’s participation in their departments, and his parents accepted the Intern of the Year award on his behalf from Board President **Eric Lucan**. ■

Who's New & Welcome!

Courtney Asker (Santa Rosa), Legal Intern, Public Defender’s Office

Sharva Banker (Novato), High School Intern, District Attorney’s Office

Emily Boulad (Petaluma), Law Clerk, District Attorney’s Office

Betsy Bradbury (Glen Ellen) Programming Assistance Volunteer, Civic Center Library

Emily Cox (San Rafael), Marin Center Volunteer, Cultural Services

Joshua Epstein (Surfside), Law Clerk, District Attorney’s Office

Matthew Gamo (Novato), High School Intern, District Attorney’s Office

Mia Ginsburg (San Rafael), Law Clerk, District Attorney’s Office

William Hobbs (Corte Madera), Traffic Operations Intern, Department of Public Works

Arnel Illic (San Francisco), Immigration Legal Intern, Public Defender’s Office

Charlotte Kingman (Tiburon), Public Administrator Intern, Department of Finance

Henry Nicholson (Berkeley), Certified Legal Intern, Public Defender’s Office

Marisa Ornelas (San Francisco), Immigration Legal Intern, Public Defender’s Office

Danielle Padillo (Novato), Summer Legal Research Intern, County Counsel’s Office

Nancy Pasqua (San Rafael), Marin Center Volunteer, Cultural Services

Maya Saibel (Corte Madera), Pre-Law Intern, District Attorney’s Office

Christopher Vargelis (San Anselmo), Legal Intern, Public Defender’s Office

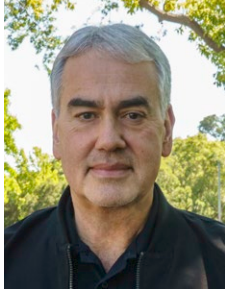
Weiyang Wang (Daly City), Immigration Legal Intern, Public Defender’s Office

Jenna Welsh (San Francisco), Certified Legal Intern, Public Defender’s Office

Fire Lookout Keeps Watch Over Our Community

By Scott Harrop

PHOTO BY STEVE ZIMAN



Richard Llorca

Soon after starting his day job as an accountant with the Marin County Fire Department, **Richard Llorca** learned of the department's all-volunteer fire lookout program.

He joined the group of 30-plus lookouts who gather each year for a day of orientation before signing up for shifts at one of county's two lookout towers.

After fire season starts, normally in June or July, volunteers stand watch for six- or seven-hour shifts at the Gardner Lookout on Mt. Tam high above Mill Valley and the Dickson Lookout on Mt. Barnabe near Samuel P. Taylor State Park. The season continues until the rains come, usually in mid-November.

"You walk the catwalk every 20 minutes, looking for signs of smoke or anything unusual," Richard explained. Twice a shift, he radios department headquarters with information on wind, cloud cover, humidity, and temperature. He volunteers five or six times a year and hasn't yet had to call in a fire.

Most readings are taken by onsite instruments, but volunteers also rely on binoculars and the naked eye.

"The human element is important," he emphasized, especially in interpreting smoke and fire spread.

One fascinating instrument, and one of the oldest, is the Osborne Fire Finder. Richard uses this device to determine the direction of a potential fire and provide accurate information to fire crews.

A Los Angeles native, Richard moved to Marin some 25 years ago and raised his two sons to "be of service," doing community projects such as wildlife restoration planting. After working in web design, real estate, advertising/marketing, and home lending, he applied for several County of Marin positions.

"I guess I was pretty insistent, because they finally took me on with the Fire Department," Richard said with a grin. He utilizes the accounting skills he developed early in his career. "I love working for the county—it feels very meaningful."

"Richard is the kind of person whose calm demeanor immediately puts others at ease," said Fire Engineer **Bjorn Anderson**, staff coordinator of the lookout program.

Lookout duty is mostly solitary, and that suits Richard. He enjoys hiking alone in and around the Mt. Tam watershed, from Lake Lagunitas to the mountain's East Peak or along the area's waterfront paths.

The top level of the two-story Gardner lookout has a small kitchenette and bed, making it a comfortable place for a volunteer between tours on the catwalk. "I once spent the night up there," he said. "It was an amazing experience."



PHOTO COURTESY OF RICHARD LLORCA

Richard Llorca pauses on the catwalk of the lookout tower on Mt. Tamalpais.

Bjorn describes Richard as a steady, positive presence: "Richard's quiet reliability and willingness to give his time for the greater good make him not only a valued volunteer, but also someone truly appreciated by everyone who knows him." ■

The 2026 lookout program is full. To express interest in volunteering in future, check the Fire Department's [get-involved page](#).

Primaveras Event Enjoys Volunteer Support

PHOTO BY BOB DELL



Dancers perform at a lively springtime event supported by more than 40 volunteers at the South Novato Library. Volunteers helped with set-up, parking direction, greeting, and food distribution at the library and supported an after party held at nearby Hamilton Elementary School. The multicultural and multilingual Primaveras event was open to all. It featured Yucatec dance, story time, a lion dance, a Library Buddies presentation, salsa dancing, Korean drumming, kickboxing class, a parade, and more. Volunteer adults, young adults, and students chipped in, including people from Novato High, Terra Linda High, Archie Williams High, San Jose Middle School, the Asian American Alliance of Marin, and Dominican University.

Search and Rescue Leader Is County's Volunteer of the Year

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Living in Mill Valley, he was able to enjoy nature almost every day after work, but Search and Rescue offered "a justification for spending a lot of time outdoors."

Starting in 2018 and training together, father and daughter quickly realized just how time-consuming SAR could be. Volunteers are always on call and must complete three required trainings plus optional courses in medical assistance, navigation, and rope rescue systems.

Gideon later managed the team's fundraising, soliciting donations for gear, vehicles, and trainings. (See his profile in the December 2023 [MarinfoNOW](#).)

When Covid hit, Gideon committed to training a dog with the California Rescue Dog Association. His first canine, Siberia, lacked the necessary drive, forcing him to withdraw her from the program. Soon afterward, a breeder contacted him about an 11-month-old male he named Bruce.

Now Bruce accompanies him on most callouts. Last April, the pair found an Alzheimer's patient in Sebastopol who had wandered off without his walker and fallen. Bruce located the man after a team of firefighters had narrowly missed him the night before.



PHOTO BY LAINE HENDRICKS

Honoring excellence: Board President Eric Lucan, left, Volunteer of the Year Gideon Bernstein, Sheriff's Search and Rescue Coordinator Lt. Pierre Ahuncain, Supervisor Dennis Rodoni, Supervisor Brian Colbert, and Chief Executive Officer Derek Johnson smile while Search and Rescue K9 Bruce, foreground, eyes the camera.

(Siberia, now Bruce's emotional support dog, stays home with the family when Bruce is out in the field.)

As Gideon became more involved, he was elected SAR Boot Camp manager and began overseeing a multi-day, 80-hour exercise including trail rescues working with a litter and wheel, and overnight camping without tents or sleeping bags.

"You have to be ready to survive with just what's in your pack, in case the helicopter isn't able to pick you up on schedule," he says.

Marin County is the focus, but SAR's 120 volunteers respond to rescues throughout California, from Los Angeles to the Oregon border.

Callouts average 50 to 60 a year. Most are resolved quickly but typically about a dozen become full-blown searches.

Years ago, most calls involved lost hikers, but those became less common as location technology improved. Nowadays, people with dementia are one of the largest categories of missing people.

Gideon appreciates it when people see him in uniform and thank him for his service, but he is also amused. "Why are they thanking me?" he asks. "I'm getting more out of this than I'm putting into it!"

Quite a statement, considering his level of dedication. SAR's staff coordinator, Sheriff's Lt. **Pierre Ahuncain**, describes Gideon as "an incredibly dedicated volunteer. Just one example is that he had nearly 900 volunteer hours of service with the team in 2025 alone."

Gideon says SAR volunteering is truly rewarding. "Before this I was just going through life; now I have a sense of purpose in the community."

The Board of Supervisors recognized him for "providing guidance and practical support, demonstrating compassion and kindness, supporting the principles of public safety, and embodying the spirit of service." Board President **Eric Lucan** presented Gideon with a resolution of commendation and the 2025–2026 Volunteer of the Year award during a special ceremony on May 18 at the Marin Civic Center. ■

Thumbs Up for Exemplary Volunteers, Interns, and Staff Liaisons



PHOTO BY LAINE HENDRICKS

Honorees and speakers show their approval during a Board of Supervisors ceremony celebrating this year's outstanding MarinShares and Marinerns participants. Board President **Eric Lucan** presided, and Human Resources Director **Christina Cramer** emceed the annual event, which has been hosted by the board every year since the volunteer program was founded in 1979. Department leaders spoke about honorees' positive impacts. From the county's executive level, Supervisors **Dennis Rodoni** and **Brian Colbert** and Chief Executive Officer **Derek Johnson** congratulated participants. For articles about the Volunteer of the Year and Intern of the Year, see page 1. Future issues of this newsletter will highlight the teams of the year and the top staff supervisors of volunteers and interns.

Happy Anniversary

We congratulate these volunteers who celebrate their anniversaries this month and thank them for their ongoing involvement.

47 YEARS

Michael St. John (Fairfax), Search & Rescue Volunteer, Marin County Sheriff's Office

32 YEARS

Robert Eichstaedt (Larkspur), Environmental Steward, Marin County Parks

27 YEARS

Eric Zeller (Rohnert Park), Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service/Auxiliary Communications Service (RACES/ACS) Volunteer, Marin County Fire

23 YEARS

John Polman (Corte Madera), Volunteer Driver, Marin County Fire

16 YEARS

Sean Seeley (San Anselmo), Fire Lookout, Marin County Fire

14 YEARS

David Atkin (San Anselmo), Fire Lookout, Marin County Fire

11 YEARS

Stan Green (Greenbrae), Financial Abuse Specialist Team (FAST) Volunteer, Health & Human Services (HHS)

8 YEARS

Deborah Fox (Corte Madera), Event Aide and Administrative Aide, Human Resources

Lynn Merlo (San Rafael), Preservationist, Corte Madera Library

Ann Shores (Corte Madera), RACES/ACS Volunteer, Marin County Fire

7 YEARS

Natalie Dybeck (Novato), Newsletter Writer, Human Resources

6 YEARS

Michael Pechner (Fairfield), **Steve Quarles** (Mill Valley), **Robert Rowlands** (Mill Valley), Fire Lookouts, Marin County Fire

5 YEARS

Bruce Bartel (Novato), **Charles Benet** (Tiburon), **Dirck Brinckerhoff** (San Rafael), Radio Communications Volunteers, Department of Public Works

4 YEARS

Jalynne Allen (San Rafael) Seeds of Hope Program Volunteer, HHS

Leah Del Pomo (San Rafael), Seeds of Hope Program Photographer, HHS

Michelle Funez (Novato), Friends of the Family Volunteer, HHS

Melody Mitchell (Larkspur), Marin County Fair Volunteer, Cultural Services

Lee Notowich (Ross), FAST Volunteer, HHS

Jonathan Posner (San Rafael), Marin Center Volunteer, Cultural Services

2 YEARS

Oldhina Alatraste (Novato), **Jason Balderama** (San Rafael), **Alex Buffington** (Mill Valley),

Barry Crotty (San Rafael), **Kay Crotty** (San Rafael), **Karla Cruz** (San Rafael), **Elizabeth Ezell** (Novato), **Lucille Ezell** (Novato), **Bruce Frank** (Tiburon), **Susan Garcia** (San Anselmo), **Narda**

Gaskell (Novato), **Dana Gross** (Santa Rosa), **Ron Gross** (San Rafael), **Megha Gupta** (San Rafael), **Karen Iacobucci** (Greenbrae), **Carol LaBranche** (San Rafael), **Jack Liebster** (Corte Madera), **Vicky Marquez** (Novato), **Adriana Sarahi Martinez** (San Rafael), **Shahd Rahman** (Novato), **Leslie Robinett** (San Rafael), **Devlin Rocco** (Mill Valley), **Philip Sharp** (San Rafael), **Sharon Starr** (San Rafael), **Sarah Weber** (Novato), **Shari Weiss** (Novato), Marin Center Volunteers, Cultural Services

Daniel Frerich (San Rafael), Marin Center Youth Volunteer, Cultural Services

Helen Hempel (Mill Valley), Senior Peer Counselor, HHS

1 YEAR

Jakub Colton (San Francisco), Environmental Steward, Marin County Parks

Gail Galli (San Anselmo), **Eric Lehto** (San Rafael), **Michelle Rong** (Novato), Marin Center Volunteers, Cultural Services

Cara Gereau (San Geronimo), Mounted Patrol Volunteer, Marin County Parks

Michael Ham (San Rafael), **Reede Stockton** (Forest Knolls), Radio Communications Volunteers, Department of Public Works

Scott Hershman (Lagunitas), **Kenric Lee** (San Rafael), Fire Lookouts, Marin County Fire

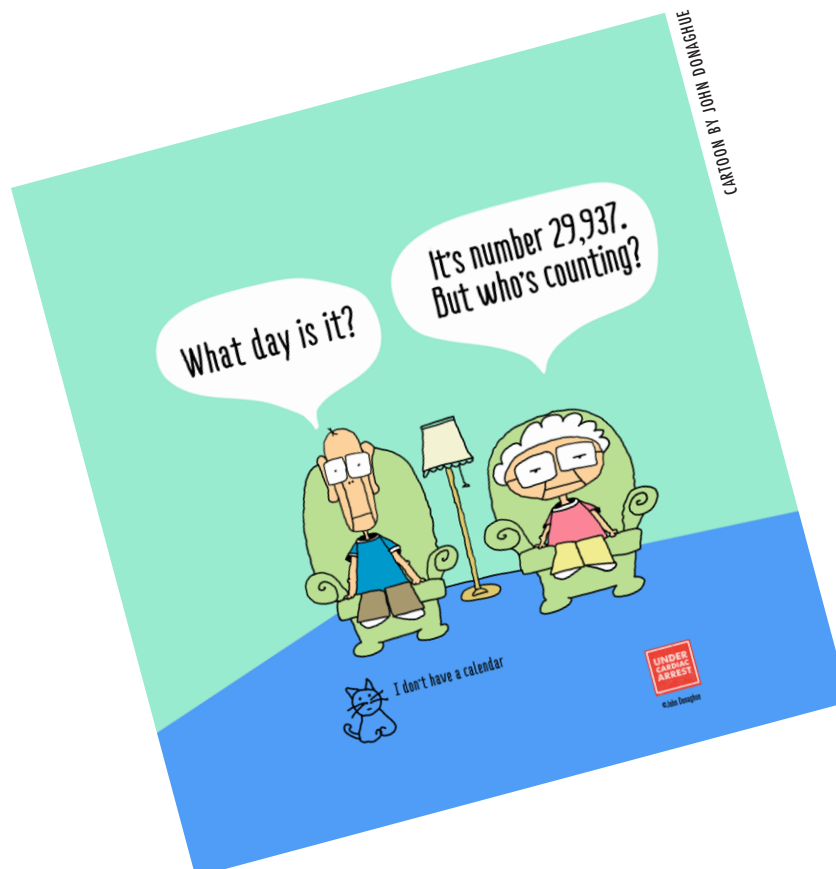
Forrest Xie (Novato), Marin Center Youth Volunteer, Cultural Services

Fire Recruits Celebrate Milestone



PHOTO BY ASHER GOLDBLATT

Recruits, staff, families, and friends gathered recently to cheer FIRE Foundry graduates. The foundry is the Marin County Fire Department's workforce development program. It focuses on training, education, and mentorship for people pursuing careers in fire service, fire-adjacent fields, and emergency medical services. The year-long program includes more than 17 college credits and concludes with a ceremony acknowledging recruits' hard work and perseverance. Foundry coordinator **Mimi Choudhury** partners with community agencies College of Marin (COM) and Conservation Corps North Bay (CCNB) on the program and the graduation. Class members celebrated their success on May 21 at the Jonas Center on COM's Indian Valley College campus in Novato. Pictured from left, back row: **Julian Topete-Andreotti**, CCNB Coordinator **Mariah Chastain**, **Daniel Nuñez**, **Nick Prosch**, **Meagen Adkins**, **Alejandra Dejesus**, **Johnny Cifuentes**. Front row: **Emilia Hernandez**, **Marlo Lile**, **Destiny Ruiz**, **Beau Gullede**, CCNB Coordinator **Jenna Parsons**. Not pictured: **Emily Oliver Ferron**, **Kursi Muhammad**, **Ethan Roma**, **Duriel Fortenberry**.



CARTOON BY JOHN DONAGHY