

Meet Orange County's 125 most influential people for 2022

Find the people who made a difference in Orange County over the past year. Some you'll know and others you probably should.



Welcome to Register's 125 Most Influential People in Orange County. We are highlighting people who made a difference in 2022. All, in some way, inspired. You may know their names, but others will be surprises. And many are based on the suggestions of you, our readers. (Composite by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)
By [TODD HARMONSON](mailto:tharmonson@scng.com) | tharmonson@scng.com | Orange County Register
PUBLISHED: December 27, 2022 at 7:00 a.m. | UPDATED: December 29, 2022 at 4:26 p.m.

In 2022, many of Orange County's nearly 3.2 million people made a difference and tried to make others' lives a little bit better.

Some were essential to the opening of a world-class cancer center or a long-awaited museum. Others innovated or taught. One produced as both a pitcher and hitter at a never-before-seen level.

And in May, a doctor stopped a shooter at a Laguna Woods church and likely saved many people as he lost his life.

The Orange County Register each year attempts to shine a spotlight on some of the people who made the county special. Some of them are names you know; others are names you should. And there are some young OC residents who might just blow us all away for many years to come.

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La Quinta High School student Phuc (James) Chau Nguyen developed a cancer-detecting toothbrush that earned him recognition as a finalist for the Rise Challenge, a global philanthropic initiative that provides support to young people who are working toward solving humanity's most pressing problems. He won a full scholarship to a university of his choice, seed investment to fund a company that can produce the product for consumers and a network of mentors. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Ashleigh Aitken

After coming close in 2018, [Aitken won the post of mayor](#) for the county's biggest city and is the first woman ever to hold it. She moves into the position with several key issues facing the city, including determining the best approach for the [Angel Stadium property](#).

Rashad Al Dabbagh

The founder and executive director of the Arab American Civic Council [led efforts to formally recognize the ethnic enclave in Anaheim as Little Arabia](#). In August, the Anaheim city council formalized the designation, making it the first officially recognized Arab American enclave in the U.S.

Jillian Albayati

Albayati, the [Orange County high school female athlete of the year](#) for 2021-22, became the first girl to pitch in a CIF-SS baseball championship, inspiring young female athletes. She was 12-0 with a 1.51 ERA and also hit .351 with 17 RBIs.

Ash Alvandi

Alvandi, the district director for state Sen. Dave Min, oversaw case work that helped more than 3,000 constituents (including over 2,000 who received their EDD benefits), forged close relationships with a wide array of local stakeholders and influentials. Alvandi is the only Iranian-American district director in the state, and has become a key mentor for younger Iranian-Americans who are interested in serving in government.

Levon Alyanakyian

Alyanakyian, who lives in Laguna Hills and attends St. Margaret's, has more than [30 Little Free Libraries in communities around Armenia](#), this summer lugging seven suitcases filled with books to seed the mimi libraries.

Valerie Amezcua

Amezcuca was [elected as the first female mayor of Santa Ana](#) in its 153-year history and drew more reader nominations, by far, than anyone else on the Register's 2022 list. "It feels great to be the first, but I'm not the last," she told the Register. "I will not be the last."

Candice Appleby

Appleby, 37, [earned a gold medal at the International Surfing Association World SUP and Paddleboard Championship](#) in San Juan, Puerto Rico in November. She's also started her own coaching program, Ocean Academy.

Dr. Carlos Becerra

Hoag Family Cancer Institute's [new medical director of cancer research](#) oversaw the hospital's growing number of cancer clinical trials.

LaSharnda Beckwith

Beckwith leads Lutheran Social Services' nearly 200 staff, 22 board members and thousands of supporters in five counties. The Orange-based nonprofit provides critical social services in online, hybrid and in-person delivery to the community's most vulnerable since the start of the pandemic. In late 2022, the nonprofit executive led the charge to host the organization's first-ever Color of Hope Gala to honor individuals and entities throughout the region who've made significant contributions to community social services.

Russ Bendel

Bendel [opened Bloom Restaurant + Bar in San Juan Capistrano](#), adding to his South County culinary empire that includes Vine in San Clemente, Ironwood in Laguna Hills, Olea in Newport and Sapphire in Laguna Beach.

Julia Bendis

Bendis, an author and matchmaker who came to the U.S. from the Soviet Union in 1989, devoted herself to raising funds for civilians in Ukraine since the start of the war with Russia. This reader-nominated influencer donated translated documents to help get evacuees and refugees to safety.

Lauren Brand

The executive director of operations of Be Well OC in 2022 pushed for more mental-health help for local first responders such as law enforcement and hospital workers.

Steve Brazeel

Brazeel is the [founder and CEO of Elevated Foods](#). Founded during the pandemic, his company incentivizes growers to restore and regenerate the nation's farmlands using climate-smart practices for the long-term benefit of people, the planet and their own bottom lines. Elevated Foods was awarded \$20 million in federal grant money to carry out its work.

Michael Brennan

The former Servite and St. Anthony leader was [named Mater Dei president in January](#) after troubles hit the school's famous athletic department. "I just felt a calling to come here," Brennan said. "My insides just said, 'You may have the unique experience for what Mater Dei High School needs for this period of time.' "

LaVal Brewer

Brewer, the [president & CEO of South County Outreach in Irvine](#), led a group that served 6,189 people in the fiscal year that ended in 2022. It provided 731 households with rental or utility assistance, 400% more than the previous year. And it distributed 758,270 pounds of food.

James S. Bullock

Bullock, who was nominated by a reader, recently served as the chair of the User Committee for the James Webb Space Telescope, which he and other space-oriented minds were tasked with helping to select and organize the scientific projects the \$10 billion telescope is undertaking from its distant vantage. The telescope became fully operational on July 11 when it captured the first never before seen science-quality images that showcased countless galaxies across space.

John Burns

Irvine-based Burns is the [go-to guy for homebuilders and for business writers](#) alike, appearing regularly in such publications as the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. In addition to producing a national single-family rent index and tracking residential investor activity, John Burns Real Estate Consulting's network of experts recently tracked more than \$50 billion being invested in single-family rental housing.

Austin Butler

Butler, the star of "Elvis" who is generating a lot of [buzz for a potential best actor Oscar nomination](#), was born in Anaheim and grew up in Orange County. When he was 13, he was spotted at the OC Fair by someone who worked for a background-acting company and was asked if he wanted to work as an extra. He will appear in "Dune: Part 2" in 2023.

Tom Campbell

This former congressman who now teaches law at Chapman University [helped found the Common Sense Party](#), which nearly made the ballot this year. They ultimately fell short. But Campbell's message about the need for a strong third-party alternative resonated with tens of thousands of Californians.

Charita Carter

The [Walt Disney Imagineering executive producer](#) took the creative lead on Mickey and Minnie's Runaway Railway ride that is coming to Disneyland in January 2023.

David O. Carter

The federal judge has been in the middle of all sorts of controversies, but the one involving attorney John Eastman, his emails, Chapman University and the House of Representatives' Jan. 6 committee made the others pale in comparison. He concluded that former [President Donald Trump and Eastman likely committed crimes](#).

Nancy Caruso

Caruso has been leading volunteer teams [in search of the Pismo clam](#), which has nearly disappeared from the Southern California coast. She hopes to help restore the species.

Ben Case

The Northwood High School music teacher is one of five educators in [California named Teacher of the Year](#). "I've worked really hard, but that's because I see so much reward that comes out of it," he said. "And I just want to be the teacher that I would want to have if I were the student."

Matthew Chang

Chang, who was nominated by a reader, was the first student at-large member of [Irvine's Green Ribbon Environmental Committee](#), in which he serves as the chair of the Outreach and Education subcommittee. Chang, the founder of the Irvine Climate Action Network, was reappointed to the committee in 2022 for a second term at 15 years old.

Peggy Chase

Chase is the executive director of the [Orange County Bird of Prey Center](#), which educates people and rehabilitates injured birds of prey. The Lake Forest non-profit has an all-volunteer staff.

Nathan Chen

Chen, the American skater who trains at Great Park Ice in Irvine, [dominated the competition in Beijing to win his first Olympic gold medal](#). He completed five quad jumps in the free program that he performed to "Rocket Man" to win with an Olympic record total score of 332.60.

Dr. John Cheng

The Aliso Viejo doctor charged an enraged gun-wielding man and lost his life in a [Laguna Woods church shooting, saving a group of parishioners](#). He was known for his compassion and love of people.

Jasmine Chhabria

Chhabria received the [Outstanding Youth award during a National Philanthropy Day](#) luncheon in November. The Northwood High graduate, who now attends Occidental College, created a historical reenactment of the Mendez v. Westminster

1947 Supreme Court case and helped plan the Mendez Monument Trail and Park in Westminster.

Dr. Regina Chinsio-Kwong

Chinsio-Kwong, chief medical officer with the OC Health Care Agency and the county's health officer, led local public health responses to the coronavirus pandemic as well as the [onslaught of the quickly spreading RSV](#), a respiratory virus that is most dangerous in young children.

Sawyer and Jackson Collins

The two teen brothers and St. Margaret's students started making iconic [Laguna Beach Christmas ornaments last December](#). In 2022, they doubled their efforts and donate a percentage of their funds to the Pacific Marine Mammal Center.

Christine Cordon and Adolfo Ozaeta

Cordon, Westminster's city manager, and Ozaeta, the city's assistant city manager, sparked changes in Westminster after the departure of their predecessors during a time of political turmoil. The reader-nominated duo brought back public events, implemented the city's first strategic plan and, according to the nominator, introduced the city to topics that were considered taboo before.

Kevin Costner

The Villa Park High and Cal State Fullerton graduate continued his run as the lead of the wildly popular "Yellowstone," which scored the top-rated scripted series season premiere for 2022. This year, he also [earned a Golden Globe nomination for his performance as the show's patriarch](#), John Dutton, and a Screen Actors Guild nomination as part of the show's ensemble.

Alicia Cox

Cox, owner of SeaLegs at Bolsa Chica State Beach, extended her coastal empire by [opening Sahara Sandbar & Pizza in April](#) at Huntington State Beach. She previously opened the Huntington Beach House in 2021 and is slated to open California Fork & Spoon on the beach in 2023.

Dr. Coleen Cunningham

Cunningham, the chair for the UCI Department of Pediatrics and senior vice president and pediatrician-in-chief for CHOC, leads national and international [pediatric clinical trials in RSV vaccine studies for young children](#), one of which was recently published the Journal of Infectious Disease and studies of anti-HIV monoclonal antibodies administered to newborns born to women living with HIV. Anti-HIV monoclonal antibodies might provide a future option to prevent or treat HIV in young children.

Moti Ferder

His company, Newport Beach-based Lugano Diamonds, made the [\\$2.5 million donation that the Orange County Museum of Art is using to cover admission](#). It will be free to go to the museum for at least the next 10 years.

Katrina Foley

The Orange County supervisor made \$20,000 grants available to Santa Ana business owners who suffered steep declines in shoppers during the street car line construction. [She also won reelection](#) after redistricting left her in a district with a stronger Republican presence than the one she had been in that was friendlier to Democrats.

Bill Foltz

Foltz was named the CEO of OCVibe, which got [approval from the Anaheim City Council in September](#). It's a \$4 billion development that will turn parking lots and properties around the Honda Center and ARTIC transit station into a nearly 100-ace entertainment district with 1,500 new homes.

Paula Fox

Fox dedicates her time every week to seek out food and feed the less fortunate in our community and the surrounding area. With her husband Don, they coordinate food pickup and deliveries from local markets and Second Harvest Food Bank.

Freddie Freeman

The El Modena High graduate and former National League MVP signed a six-year, \$162 million contract with the Dodgers in March. He led Major League Baseball with 199 hits and 47 doubles in 2022. In August, he [pledged \\$500,000 to his alma mater](#) to help build a clubhouse for the school's baseball program.

Lisa Fujimoto

Fujimoto, who was nominated by a reader, recently was recognized as an OC Influencer for Good for her role as CEO of the Priority Center, while she continues to grow the organization and lead it in its efforts to end the generational cycle of abuse.

Joe Garcia

The police sergeant went to his boss with an idea: How about if patrol cars had backpacks with fidget spinners, headphones, stopwatches and other such things? Now, if Seal Beach officers on calls come across people who have autism spectrum disorder or other special needs [they have tools to help distract them from the chaos, to help calm them](#).

Ryan Getzlaf

Getzlaf ended his 17-year career with the Ducks, which included a Stanley Cup championship and 11 seasons as the team's captain. He also [continued working with CureDuchenne](#), a Newport Beach-based organization dedicated to saving the lives of boys and young men affected by Duchenne muscular dystrophy is his true legacy.

Getzlaf and his wife Paige host the Getzlaf Golf Shootout, raising more than \$5.3 million for CureDuchenne to fund early-stage research and bring new therapies.

Ignacio Gomez

Gomez, a sculptor whose work is featured in the Smithsonian American Art Museum, [created three monuments at the Mendez Tribute Monument Park in Westminster](#). In two of them, the Mendez family names are immortalized in statues, Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez in one, and another that depicts a boy and a girl holding books that say “college” symbolizing the 5,000 children represented in the class action case Mendez v. Westminster, which led to the desegregation of schools in California.

Jasmin Gonzalez

Gonzalez has played a key role in [San Juan Capistrano’s burgeoning dining scene](#). She and her development partner helped find locations for Heritage Barbecue and Mayfield and recently opened Breezy, a Filipino coffee shop. She curated the restaurants for Stanton’s Rodeo 39 Public Market and will play a similar role with Rodeo at River Street, a new food hall opening in SJC in 2023.

Sue Grant

Through Grant’s leadership in 2022, [The Literacy Project](#), which is based in Newport Beach, raised enough funding to scale to four additional states – New Mexico, Hawaii, Nevada and Washington – helping thousands of other struggling readers. The organization also successfully pivoted to an online version of their program for schools who were still utilizing distance learning methods and did see a notable increase in scores.

David and Darlene Gray

This couple has been [sponsoring a family of Afghan refugees](#), helping to furnish a home for them, arrange transportation and plan a baby shower for the expecting mom. They have a long history of sponsoring refugees, welcoming them into their home and family despite language and cultural gaps.

Scott Green

Green, an [Orange County philanthropist](#), venture capitalist and owner of Captive Eight, a high-end, professional production company, also founded Irvine-based Oscar & Ma. The training center was launched in 2020 during the depths of the pandemic and was looking to help move people stuck in low-end jobs to a better career path, providing them opportunities to learn new business skills, and get them into better-paying jobs.

Meghan Haney

Haney, a Huntington Beach police officer, was awarded the [department’s Lifesaving Award in October](#): Haney was among those who responded to a woman who had

somehow gotten atop a two-story building on Beach Boulevard who said she was going to jump. Showing compassion over a 15-minute-plus conversation, the officer helped persuade the woman to safety come down.

Elizabeth Hansburg

Hansburg, co-founder of the local pro-housing YIMBY group, [has been active in 2022](#) in tracking local progress by cities in developing new housing plans required under the Regional Housing Needs Assessment program, holding regular webinars on the subject and on consequences for cities that fail to win state approval for their new “housing elements.”

Daniel Hedigan

The [new CEO of FivePoint Holdings](#) will likely be rolling out plans for more commercial real estate development at the company’s Great Park Neighborhoods properties in 2023.

John Ho

Ho is the [CEO of Landsea Homes](#), which finished the 543-home IronRidge project in Lake Forest 2022. He’ll be one of many homebuilder navigating a rough real estate economy in 2023.

Joyce Hoffman

The former pro surfer earned a [full-size bronze statue in Dana Point](#) for her feats back in the ’60s and ’70s as a trailblazing female in surfing. She said the statue represented “all the trailblazers who wouldn’t accept the concept that surfing was a man’s sport, that women were expected to stay on the beach while the guys had all the fun.”

Ryan Honary

Honary, a Newport Beach teen who attends Stanford Online High School, [created the Early Wildfire Detection Network](#) which can detect the early signs of wildfire as well as identifying spread patterns. His startup recently received a \$250,000 investment from Irvine Ranch Conservancy.

Shelley Hoss

The [Orange County Community Foundation president and CEO](#) leads an organization that hit key milestones, including reaching the \$20 million mark raised for OC nonprofits through the iHeart OC Giving Days. OCCF also launched with philanthropist Keith Swayne the OC Social Justice Fund to help 25 OC nonprofits.

Kim Huxman

After learning how rat poison can harm wildlife, pets and kids, [Huxman launched the HOOT Group](#) to push to end the use of rodenticides in their community. They’ve

installed owl boxes, done advocacy work and inspired a neighboring homeowners association earlier this year to ban such poisons.

Toni Iseman

Iseman stepped down in December after serving 24 years [on the City Council](#), four times as mayor. Iseman is among the last activist council people in the county and was responsible, in part, for saving Laguna Canyon, and helping provide protection for the ocean environment.

David Ivers

Ivers, South Coast Repertory's artistic director, introduces actual repertory theater back into the Costa Mesa theater's DNA for the first time this century, linking productions of two plays written about 75 years apart by a White woman and a Black man. [Focusing on family and legacy, "The Little Foxes" and "Appropriate,"](#) will share the same set and casts in alternating performances beginning in late January. In his role since 2019, Ivers says connecting the works is intended to "entertain us, enthrall us and inform us with messages that are powerful, thoughtful and relevant."

Yoojung Jang

Earlier this year, Jang won the national High School Project Award [from the prestigious Lowell Milken Center](#) for a multimedia project that shed light on systematic sexual slavery forced upon South Korean women between 1910 and 1945.

Dylan Jin-Ngo

As the [founder and executive director of Youth Investors Corp](#), Jin-Ngo has been at the forefront of the mission to bring equity and access to financial literacy for youth in California. In 2022, Youth Investors Corp expanded its programs to three counties (Los Angeles, Orange County, Santa Barbara), worked with 15 community partners, and reached more than 850 youth in its lifetime impact. His work has been recognized by Rep. Michelle Steel, California State Controller Betty Yee and other elected officials throughout California.

Barry Kielsmeier

As the chairman for Beach Cities Interfaith Services, Kielsmeier serves as a vital and necessary catalyst and a fierce advocate for those who are at the brink of housing insecurity. In 2022, the agency assisted 30 residents, 19 of whom are adults and 11 are minors. He is persistent in his endeavors to ensure that the clients of BCIS continue to maintain their housing and their sense of dignity.

Chloe Kim

Kim, who attended La Palma Christian School, became the [first woman to win back-to-back halfpipe gold medals](#) when she dazzled at the Beijing Olympics. She scored a 94.00 on her first run to lock up her second gold. She was only 21 when she did it.

John Kraus

Kraus oversaw and led the entire rebuild of the [iconic Spirit of Dana Point](#). “I’m happy about bringing the vessel back to the community of Dana Point,” the captain said, “and seeing the public and the schools experience her and learn from her for years to come.”

Inna Levien

After Ukrainians began arriving in Tijuana earlier this year in hopes of crossing the border into the U.S., [Levien and other South County Russian-speaking moms showed up to help](#) guide them, turning a confusing situation into ordered chaos. Levien spent days and nights at an impromptu encampment, helping to coordinate volunteers, translating documents, passing out donated food and playing with refugee children.

Joshua Lou

The [16-year-old Oxford Academy student](#) organized two global recycling campaigns called 1MB (One Million Batteries) and WEEecycle (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Recycling) and engaged more than 1,000 student volunteers. Lou also documented his TAE/1MB journey and 40-plus action tips for youth activism in his 104-page, two-time-international-award-winning eBook titled “Youth Activism: Teens Against E-waste and Our Quest to Collect 1 Million Batteries to Save the Planet.” He also delivered a TEDx speech about the dangers of e-waste.

Palmer Luckey

Luckey is founder of Anduril, a fast-growing, 5-year-old defense contractor that raised \$1.5 billion to grow its business, including a massive headquarters in a former printing facility in Costa Mesa.

Anna Paulina Luna

The Santa Ana native is a [rising star in the Republic Party](#) and recently won election to the House of Representatives in Florida’s 13th congressional district, flipping a seat for the GOP as it took control of the House. She’s an Air Force veteran who was endorsed by former President Donald Trump.

Malaia Martinez

Martinez and co-owner Jaebin Yoo opened Malaia’s Microgreens in Irvine, an [indoor, vertical, hydroponic farm](#) that supplies greens and herbs to OC restaurants. Martinez and Yoo believe vertical farming could be a solution to food insecurity.

Mehra Marzbani

After working on the Brat TV series “Chicken Girls,” Marzbani created MENAarts Newsletter because she wanted to increase Middle Eastern North African representation in the creative arts while simultaneously countering harmful stereotypes about the community. She’s also vice president of communications for Rep. Katie Porter’s Youth Advisory Board, where she evaluates legislation and was motivated to draft her own legislation establishing a National MENA American Heritage Month, which she plans to introduce to the House next year.

Nishtha Mohendra

Mohendra is the [chief program officer at Families Forward](#), an Irvine-based nonprofit committed to helping families who are facing a housing crisis. In her role, she leads the team overseeing all agency service programs tackling family homelessness, including housing, food, counseling, career coaching, education, affordable housing development and other support services. In November, she was recognized by the Greater Irvine Chamber of Commerce as one of their 40-Under-40 honorees and elected to the Orange County Continuum of Care Board.

Arte Moreno

Moreno [announced he is selling the team that he has owned since 2003](#), a decision that will impact the long-term direction of Orange County's pre-eminent sports franchise. He had been in agreement with Anaheim on a sale of Angel Stadium, but that was set aside after controversy involving city officials.

Essraa Nawar

Nawar's reader nominator said she has [reimagined diversity at Chapman's Leatherby Libraries](#), creating and implementing the first ever Library Diversity Statement and Plan, leading the library to receive the first-ever Diversity Award. In April 2022, she was recognized as one of California's Women of Influence. She also has a show, launched in September, that follows her motto: Telling Stories: One Egyptian Expat at a time.

Malachi Nelson

The [recent USC signee from Los Alamitos High](#) spent most of the year as arguably the nation's top-rated senior quarterback, showing the possibilities of NIL deals and still giving back to his community.

Amy Neville

After her 14-year-old son died because the Oxy pill he bought contained fentanyl, Neville has thrown herself into making sure kids understand the [dangers lurking on social media networks where drugs are sold](#).

Nam Loc Nguyen

He is the [first Orange County ambassador for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#), part of a new federal program that taps community leaders around the country to promote citizenship through their own immigrant experiences. He is also the former director of the Immigration and Refugee Department of Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Phuc (James) Chau Nguyen

The recent immigrant from Vietnam and La Quinta High student developed a [cancer-detecting toothbrush](#) that earned him recognition as a finalist for the Rise Challenge, a

global philanthropic initiative that provides support to young people who are working toward solving humanity's most pressing problems. He won a full scholarship to a university of his choice, seed investment to fund a company that can produce the product for consumers and a network of mentors.

Nick Nikbakht

Nikbakht is one of the organizers of the massive demonstrations held around Orange County, including [during President Joe Biden's visit](#), to draw attention to human rights violations in Iran.

Andrew Noymer

The UC Irvine epidemiologist has been remarkably accurate at predicting the course of COVID-19 and has embraced the role of someone [who can explain what's happening to the public](#).

Shohei Ohtani

Although he [didn't repeat as the AL MVP](#), Ohtani had another historic season, becoming the first player since Babe Ruth to [reach double figures in homers and wins as a pitcher](#). Ohtani was second in AL MVP voting and fourth in voting for the AL Cy Young Award. He is expected to sign one of the richest deals in baseball history since he is approaching the final season of his contract with the Angels.

Keith Orahood

The tennis coach at JSerra High in 2022 started a [weekly wheelchair tennis camp](#). He hopes to make the school "mecca" for youth with disabilities who wish to play sports.

Bob Page

Page [took over in March](#) from the highly respected OC Registrar Neal Kelley and has managed to get through a big midterm election without any major mishaps, despite increased scrutiny from people who claim OC's elections are rife with fraud.

Monica Pal

Pal danced at many events from Irvine Global village festival to Diwali Fest, She's a recipient of the California State Seal of Civic Engagement award which is given to students exhibiting excellence in civic education, academic honor and character-building traits. She wrote and published books, including "How to celebrate Diwali" in 2022, and works as an intern with the city of Irvine.

Kirra Pinkerton

San Clemente's Pinkerton, for Team USA, [took the top spot](#) at the International Surfing Association event in Huntington Beach in September, earning an extra spot for the Olympic women's team.

Katie Porter

She [won reelection to the House of Representatives](#) in a hotly contested race against Scott Baugh that prompted a campaign visit from President Joe Biden. It will be interesting to see how much influence Porter and her white board retain as Republicans assume control of the House in January.

Bella Rasmussen

The Laguna Beach High senior became the [first girl to score two touchdowns in a varsity football game](#), serving as a role model for young female athletes. In December, she signed an endorsement deal with an artificial intelligence company.

Mike Riedel

The owner of Wild Rivers has worked tirelessly over the past decade to develop and build [the new water park](#), overcoming a series of obstacles and delays along the way. At 20 acres, the \$60 million water park is 50% larger than the original Wild Rivers with 3 acres set aside for future expansion.

Maricela Rios-Faust

Rios-Faust, the CEO of Human Options and co-chair of the [Domestic Violence Death Review Team](#), partnered with UC Irvine and the DVDRT to [release the first study](#) that includes data from a decade-long analysis of county coroner homicide and homicide/suicide cases. During Domestic Violence Awareness Month, Rios-Faust worked with the Costa Mesa Police Department to bring the community together for the first Walking Vigil to shine a light on relationship violence and the many survivors who have found a way out.

Dr. Aaron Ritter

Ritter is the [new director of two brain health programs at Hoag's Pickup Family Neurosciences Institute](#). His research has focused on cognitive disorders and dementias.

Anthony Saba

Saba is the executive director at Samueli Academy. After a decade of fundraising and construction, the innovative academy – a public charter school with a focus on helping foster youth – is complete. The school serves some 775 students, mostly from the neighborhood.

Sonik Sadozai

As a volunteer with Afghan Refugee Relief, [Sadozai has been working tirelessly to help find housing for refugees](#) forced to flee when Afghanistan fell. She's helped place dozens of families in long-term housing and helped them with other needs as they try to build new lives locally.

Natalie Salvatierra

During the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reader-nominated Salvatierra learned about people struggling with increased mental health struggles and wanted to

make a difference, so she founded the international mental health organization Solely Sunshine. She has mailed over 25,000 handwritten letters of encouragement to mental health patients with the help of people in nearly 60 countries and 45 states. She has also published the mental health children's book, "Do Not Worry, Little Donkey" and aims to help younger children learn how to overcome common childhood worries.

Maurice Sanchez

In January, he became the first Latino and person of color in the 40-year history of [California's Court of Appeal, Fourth District, Division Three](#), located in Santa Ana. He grew up in Santa Ana, graduated from UC Irvine and worked with several Orange County community organizations as he advanced in his career.

Lucy Santana-Ornelas

Santana-Ornelas marked her 20th year guiding [Girls Inc. OC](#), which she's grown and diversified tremendously. The national organization got \$10 million from Melinda French Gates with some of that money going to help at-risk young girls in the county.

Efrem Schulz and Chris Gronkowski

Schulz, the vocalist of Orange County bands Death By Stereo and Manic Hispanic, owns Programme Skate & Sound in Fullerton with Gronkowski. The skate and clothing store and record shop has fostered both the local skate and music scenes by hosting small concerts featuring local and national talent as well as promoting positivity and camaraderie in both scenes.

Leslie Schwene

Schwene is the first woman in Huntington Beach's 100-year lifeguarding history to be [promoted to the rank of captain](#) of Huntington Beach Marine Safety.

Anton and Jennifer Segerstrom

The [Segerstroms were instrumental](#) in finding a permanent home for the \$94 million Orange County Museum of Art, which opened to the public in October. "My father told me something years ago, that all great civilizations have a cultural component," said Anton Segerstrom, OCMA's largest single donor and a longtime trustee. The Segerstroms donated \$8 million to OCMA and led fundraising efforts.

Lori Shepler

After this Huntington Beach mom discovered her kids attend school near the No. 2 lead-polluting airport in the nation, Shepler [started a campaign to ban leaded fuel](#) from Long Beach Airport. A couple months later, the city approved developing a plan to hasten the airport's transition to unleaded fuel.

Rick Shintaku

Some thought desalination in California might be dead after multiple projects failed. But as general manager of South Coast Water District, Shintaku in 2022 helped [usher](#)

[through a project off the coast of Dana Point](#) that's now expected to serve as a model for other desalination efforts throughout California.

Monica Shukla-Belmontes

Shukla-Belmontes, who was nominated by a reader, oversees the Competency Based Education bachelor's and master's degree programs for adult learners to continue their higher education online at their own pace. She also is an adjunct professor at Chapman University and received an award at the 2022 Distinguished Education Awards Dinner hosted by the Orange County Chamber of Commerce.

Alan Smith

For more than a year, Smith, a Newport Beach resident, volunteered his time and expertise to design, engineer and build the [1,000-square-foot Garden of Hope](#), an organic vegetable garden, in what was previously an ugly cement and block wall parking lot in an industrial area in Santa Ana. It consists of 86 state-of-the-art elevated garden beds located at Catholic Charities of Orange County's Cantlay Food Distribution Center. The garden was dedicated in June and is now staffed by Catholic Charities and volunteers.

Fred Smoller and Mike Moodian

The Chapman professors co-founded the Sustainability Decathlon, aiming to make Orange County synonymous with new green tech. They [secured the Orange County Fairgrounds](#) as the home for the 2023 event that will feature 20 university-led teams. Smoller and Moodian also were nominated individually by readers.

Shauntina Sorrells

As [Orangewood Foundation's chief program officer](#), Sorrells was instrumental in securing the California Office of Emergency Services Youth Emergency Services grant for Orangewood, which provides \$2.25 million in funding over five years, allowing the organization to partner with the first Transition Age Youth (TAY) Shelter in OC – Covenant House — and work with youth on their path from unhoused to home.

Ashli St. Armant

The Irvine-based playwright received the Segerstrom Center for the Arts' first ever co-commission for theater in 2022 with the [development of "North: the Musical," a work aimed at young people](#). Staged in Costa Mesa in 2022, the show tapped St. Armant's personal family roots in Louisiana, telling a tale with music about pre-Civil War characters using the Underground Railroad to escape slavery. Beyond her first play, St. Armant has written novels for children and is a composer, musician, and vocalist who records and performs as Jazzy Ash along with her group the Leaping Lizards. Armant and the four-piece jazz band will be on the road performing nationally for young audiences in 2023.

Jane Stoeber

She heads the UCI Domestic Violence Clinic and was involved in [producing a February report](#) issued by the OC Death Review Team that analyzed domestic violence deaths in OC over a 10-year period.

Gloria Suess

Suess is the founder and CEO of Mary's Kitchen in Orange, which offered meals and daytime assistance to the area's hungry and homeless for years, and earlier this year, when the city ended its lease on Struck Avenue, [went to court to ensure Orange officials' plans](#) for replacing services continued efforts.

Nicole Suydam

Suydam oversees Goodwill's social enterprise operation that employs 1,400, manages 23 local thrift stores and ShopGoodwill.com – the online e-commerce marketplace for Goodwills across the country – and serves more than 18,000 people annually. She led a full platform transformation and branding refresh for the site as well as the [launch of the first ShopGoodwill mobile app](#). The site has generated more than \$1.5 billion since its inception in 1999, with more than half of that coming in the last three years.

Father Bao Thai

Father Thai, who grew up in Vietnam, [became the new rector of Christ Cathedral](#) in Garden Grove. The appointment made Thai the fourth Vietnamese American rector ever at a cathedral in the United States.

Steve Thomas

Thomas' Reports on Housing goes out to about 2,500 Orange County subscribers every two weeks, breaking down local real estate trends. The reports are widely quoted in real estate agent newsletters and commentaries.

Filipe Toledo

The Brazilian surfer, who has called Orange County home for 10 years, won his [first-ever world title at Lower Trestles](#) against the world's best surfers.

Kara Tsai

Tsai designed an app, Belief Bubble, to share the rich history, theories, and notables in the field of philosophy, which culminated into trivia, reactive diagrams and chat rooms receptive to feedback. She received the Silver Presidential Service Award for volunteering approximately 100 hours.

Susana Tubert

The creative director of Disneyland Live Entertainment brought the ["Tale of the Lion King"](#) show with an all-Black cast to Disneyland in June 2022.

Justin Turner

The ex-Dodgers third baseman, a former Cal State Fullerton star who signed as a free agent with the Boston Red Sox in December, was honored for his work off the field. He received [Major League Baseball's Roberto Clemente Award](#), which goes to the player who “best represents the game of baseball through extraordinary character, community involvement, philanthropy and positive contributions, both on and off the field.”

Vikki Vargas

Vargas [retired from NBC-4](#) after spending 40 years with the station, many as its Orange County bureau chief. The Cal State Fullerton graduate has a broadcast journalism scholarship at the school named after her, and she was honored by the Orange County Board of Supervisors as a local news icon.

Pat Verbeek

He is the [new general manager of the Ducks](#), one of pro hockey's worst teams. His “rebuild” of the team will be closely watched by the fan base as well as across the National Hockey League.

Annette Walker

The president of City of Hope Orange County oversaw the [opening of a new cancer center](#) in Irvine that brings world-class treatment much closer to home for many who previously had to drive to Duarte. It opened in July, and the [first patients were treated in August](#). Next up is an adjacent hospital.

Jennifer Wang

Wang leads the [Asian American Senior Citizen Center](#), which over the past 23 months has vaccinated more than 40,000 individuals from 27 unique ZIP codes through more than 280 community mobile vaccination clinics across the county. AASCSC brought the services to communities with limited access to information and medical services. AASCSC's mobile COVID-19 vaccination clinics have taken place in grocery stores, schools, libraries, community parks, shopping mall parking lots and other community spaces.

Rick Warren

After 42 years, Warren stepped down from the pulpit at Saddleback Church. In August, he [delivered his final sermon](#) that echoed the first one he gave at a temporary Saddleback location. “In that first sermon, I was speaking to strangers about a church that didn't exist,” said Warren, whose church draws a weekly global audience of more than 40,000.

Rob Wigod

The [retiring commissioner of the CIF-Southern Section](#) will be remembered for his work on making the playoffs more equitable and competitive. He changed the CIF-SS

operations to a more forward-thinking enterprise and made it a financially solvent office.

Bryce Young

The Heisman Trophy winner in 2021 continued to play well and became a pitch-man for college football commercials. He is considered a [strong candidate to be the No. 1 pick](#) in the 2023 NFL Draft.

Heidi Zuckerman

Zuckerman came in as the [Orange County Museum of Art's](#) new director in 2021 and opened its grand new museum in October with a 24-hour party. She said she wanted the building to be an “invitation, a beckoning to the entire community to come inside and to experience what it is we have to offer.”

Curious as to who made the list of OC's Most Influential list in previous years? You can check out [2021 here](#), [2020 here](#) and [2019 here](#).