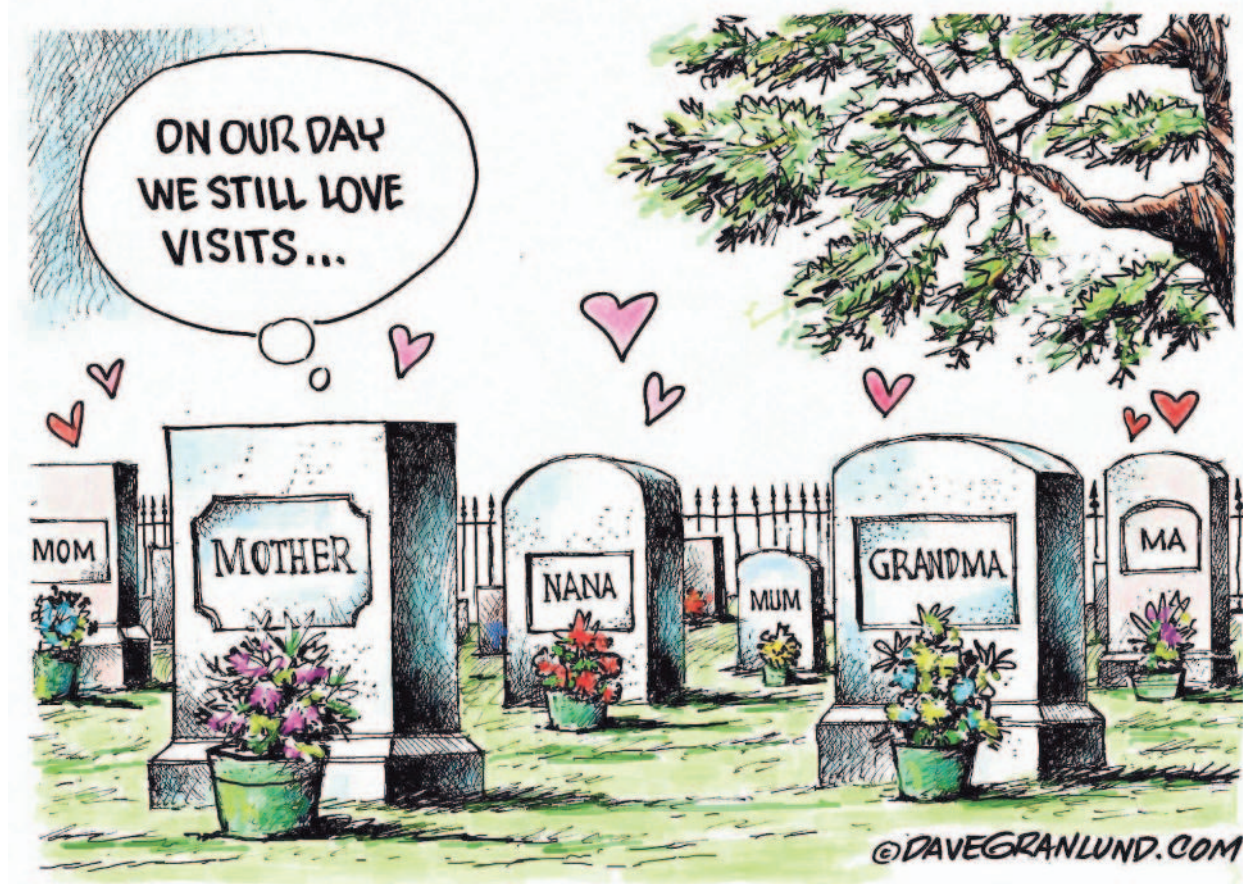


# OPINION

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION



## Mural shows a fairer path for farm workers

Your Turn

Doug Adair  
Guest columnist

This month, a mural once familiar to thousands of farm workers in the Coachella Valley returns home. It depicts more than just the vineyards and grape pickers at David Freedman Company, where I once worked. It documents a path not taken for California agriculture, and its rural communities.

The mural — which is being donated to the city of Coachella by my old boss Billy Steinberg — was first commissioned for the company’s new packing plant and offices in the unincorporated town of Thermal, more than 40 years ago.

The 14-foot-by-7-foot work was created in 1979 by Laurence Neufeld, an art major whom Billy had met at Bard College in New York and who would go on to earn his degree from the University of Connecticut. Neufeld had studied the harvest paintings of Pieter Bruegel and Vincent van Gogh, and his mural was influenced by them. He did not want to paint the vineyards realistically — this would have limited his color palette — and instead used vivid expressionistic colors associated with French Fauvist painters, like Matisse and Derain.

Neufeld applied the canvas directly to the entry wall of the office. He designed it to fit the space. To the right of the mural was the window where one might ask about a check or apply for a leave of absence or schedule a paid vacation. To the left was the conference room where we met for grievances.

The most important thing about the mural was how it depicted farm workers. Unlike standard paintings purporting to show “happy” farm workers, Neufeld portrayed them realistically. They also were picking into boxes with the eagle of the United Farm Workers (UFW), Cesar Chavez’s union.

This reflects a history that should be better known. Billy’s father, Lionel Steinberg, started growing grapes in the Coachella Valley in the early 1950s. The David Freedman Company (named after his father’s step-father) became the largest grape-growing operation in the Coachella Valley, farming over 1,300 acres. In 1970, Lionel broke with other growers and signed the first Collective Bargaining Agreement with UFW.

Today, history books and school textbooks teach this momentous signing, which opened possibilities for farm workers to improve conditions in subsequent contracts. By 1980, the union contract at Freedman — negotiated by UFW VP Gilbert Padilla and the Ranch Committee for the Union, and by Lionel and Billy for the company — provided the best wages and benefits for any farm workers in the world.

When the company was sold in 1988 — just as I earned my pension with my 10th year of service of 500 hours or more — Billy divided the canvas on which the mural was painted, and transferred it to his office in Santa Monica. There, perhaps inspired by his youth in the desert, he made a career as a composer and songwriter, including songs such as “True Colors” and “Like a Virgin.”

This winter he contacted me to let me know that he was moving offices, and would no longer have a wall big enough to house the mural. He said he wanted to donate it. Did I have any ideas about a location connected to the union or Coachella?

I suggested the new Coachella Library, and folks there were enthusiastic.

If only it were so easy to preserve and restore the way that workers were treated at Freedman. Unlike most farm workers in the U.S., Freedman workers were paid double the minimum wage, with unemployment and disability insurance, family health insurance after 60 hours of work in a month, vision and dental plans, paid holidays, a modest pension plan, paid vacations for high seniority workers and most of all, respect.

So much has changed for the farm worker community in the Coachella Valley since the 1970-’88 contracts with the David Freedman Company. Our Congressman, Dr. Raul Ruiz, is from a farm worker family in Mecca. Upward mobility is a possibility.

But the mural is also a reminder of an alternative to today’s brutal California agribusiness system, which depends on the exploitation of a vulnerable population to work in the fields. The mural demonstrates that farm labor could be a choice for people that brings modest but adequate benefits—and pride in producing food for a hungry world.

“Sí, se puede,” we can build a more just system.

*Doug Adair is a date farmer, retired grape picker, and UFW pensioner from his time at David Freedman Co. Travertine Vineyards. This essay is part of a project supported by the California Wellness Foundation.*



A mural being donated to the new Coachella library. PROVIDED BY AARON SALCIDO

## New opinion editor will keep conversation going



From the Editor

Julie Makinen  
The Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The opinion pages are, in many ways, the heart of any newspaper. Six months ago, ours were near cardiac arrest.

On Dec. 1, The Desert Sun bid farewell to Opinion Editor Al Franco, a 26-year veteran of the newsroom who accepted a buyout offer from our parent company, Gannett.

At the time, I did not know if or when we might replace him. We had no funds in our budget to do so, and even if we had the money, I had no idea who might be up for this particular task.

All I knew was I didn’t want to let the heart stop beating.

So for six months, I feel like I’ve been doing a journalistic version of CPR — seeking out financial support; writing editorials, editing columns and vetting letters; and beating the bushes for a top-notch candidate to take over where Al left off. To be honest, it’s been a lot on top of all my usual duties as executive editor. Thankfully, I did have help from two other Desert Sun editors, Winston Gieseke and Matt Solinsky.

Today, I’m pleased to report that we made it through: Both the funding for the opinion editor position and the editor have been secured.

Eric Hartley is a longtime journalist and columnist with experience in Southern California who prior to joining The Desert Sun was leading a team of seven government, education and crime reporters at The Virginian-Pilot.

Previously, he covered the city of Norfolk for The Pilot. He has also reported for the Las Vegas Review-Journal, the Orange County Register and the L.A. Daily News.

He was a metro columnist at The Capital in Annapolis, Maryland, for five years, penning three reported columns a week. His work has been recognized by the Virginia Press Association, the Maryland-Delaware-

D.C. Press Association and the Chesapeake AP Mark Twain Awards. He holds a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Maryland, College Park.

Eric has personal ties in the Coachella Valley and is familiar with our area from his time working in Southern California. As someone with experience as an editor and columnist, who understands the importance of community engagement both online and in person, Eric is the right candidate to take on this position. I look forward to his fresh ideas for invigorating our opinion offerings both in print and digitally.

Eric would not be here without the generous support of more than 100 donors from the local community who contributed via the Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation (CVJF), a 501c3 organization founded last year to bolster the local news ecosystem right here in our own backyard.

It is incredibly moving and rewarding to know that scores of our readers and neighbors value these pages so much that they would make a donation to keep this forum alive. Now more than ever, these pages truly belong to the community.

I am particularly grateful to Ricardo Loretta and Joe Wallace for their can-do spirit in establishing CVJF, recognizing the need we had, and quickly securing the funds so that we could hire Eric.

Eric is already hard at work developing plans to increase our outreach to the community, diversify our opinion offerings, and put local issues at the heart of everything we do. I know he is eager to hear your ideas and suggestions — and receive your letters, Valley Voice submissions, and even cartoons!

We aim to surprise, delight and challenge you too. We want to connect you to your neighbors, foster understanding and help this valley come together to solve common problems.

Please feel free to reach out to Eric via email at [eric.hartley@desertsun.com](mailto:eric.hartley@desertsun.com), or by phone at (760) 778-4546.

Welcome, Eric. And thank you, Coachella Valley, for making it possible for him to be here!

*Julie Makinen is California editor for the USA Today Network and executive editor of The Desert Sun. Email her at [julie.makinen@desertsun.com](mailto:julie.makinen@desertsun.com).*

## Why did it require a pandemic to open up courts to the public?

Eric Hartley

Opinion editor  
Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

It’s easy to hear justice in action these days in Riverside County.

Click on the Superior Court’s livestreaming page and you can listen to what’s happening — live — in any of dozens of courtrooms.

You can hear people telling their side of a child custody dispute, arguing a traffic ticket, being tried for murder.

It works at all 13 of the county’s courthouses, including the desert ones in Palm Springs and Indio.

It’s a commendable and straightforward example of government in action. That’s how public access should work all the time: point and click.

But it doesn’t.

The livestreaming didn’t exist before the pandemic. In April 2020, it wasn’t on the court’s online services page at all, the Internet Archive shows. By June,

it was.

Pre-pandemic, courts across California had taken some steps toward increasing public access over the years, including making some case information and documents available online.

But typically those steps were slow and halting as a toddler’s, and the good news came with a lot of catches: You have to pay to search for a defendant or plaintiff’s name to find cases, for example.

Usually, the judges and administrators who run the courts have had to be dragged kicking and screaming into making progress. It takes years and sometimes state legislation to force it.

Yet when the courts had no choice but to make hearings accessible remotely — when going to court could literally kill you — they made it happen fairly quickly and simply. That shows they could have done it any time — and that the excuses didn’t hold water.

So why does it take the threat of a fatal disease to spur government agencies into making the justice

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