Editorial: California needs a water strategy

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Dec. 30, 2015, Ventura County Star.***

As we eagerly anticipate the rain of El Niño that is promised to start this month, we are hearing a growing drumbeat to find more and better ways to save that rainwater for California's next drought.

The expected wet winter will trigger more talk of building additional reservoirs in California. As we watch the rain wash out to the ocean, those of us who have so diligently cut back on our shower time and allowed our lawns to turn brown this summer will start thinking more dams and lakes are just what California needs.

It does seem like a good idea to have additional reservoir capacity to capture the water in the rainy years to save for the dry ones. But, like most everything else in California, it's all about the money.

Read the whole story

Opinion: EDC's future in the wrong hands

By Larry Weitzman

About or shortly after the time Larry Combs was dismissed from his two-year stint as CAO of Merced County he was asked by the

Board of Supervisors of Sutter County to help them find a new CAO. It was a paid consultancy.

Combs recommended a man named Jim Arkens, who at the time was the CAO of Mono County, a county of about 3,000 square miles, but only 14,000 people, with only 6,000 of those residents living in the unincorporated areas. The only incorporated city, Mammoth Lakes, has a population of about 8,000.

Larry Weitzman

Arkens had only been CAO of Mono for about a year, accepting the position initially in Mono as its human resources director in 2011, eventually becoming chief administrative officer a year later. Sutter agreed to pay $185,000 annually on a three-year contract, plus $4,000 in moving expenses. His resume consisted of a 21-year career with Scott Paper as a fire and safety protection technician, working for the Northwest Regional Planning Commission (in Wisconsin), serving on the City Council for a claimed 24 years in Menominee, Mich. (pop. 8,458) and for the five years prior to his stint in Mono County, he was the human resources director of a small Taos, N.M., (pop. 5,716) hospital.

Obviously, being a Sutter CAO was a more significant government position, but that didn’t stop Arkens from breaking some serious rules. In a county with an annual general fund budget of about $60 million, Arkens, among other issues according to a June 2015 Grand Jury Report, sold the Sutter BOS on a $10.5 million solar system that required the county to take on $9.1 million in debt service at an interest rate of

3.7 percent. It was supposed to be able at peak hours under perfect conditions produce 1.468 megawatts of power, which was nothing special as most solar systems sell for about $7 a watt as this one did.

Because of its cost, it will not return any monetary benefits until year 16 based on the seller's (optimistic) projections. That's a big system and a lot of debt for such a small county. And two years after the contract it is not yet completed, but the county is still paying for it. However, the big problem didn't occur until some months later, when the county conducted an outside audit by Gallina LLP that revealed that CAO Arkens (and the Sutter County supervisors) were violating government accounting principles and Government Code Section(s) 27008 and 27005. The question is how?

Arkens actually was found to have a "second set of books" and kept not only this $10.5 million contract from the auditor/treasurer, but collected and spent funds regarding this contract in a separate account apart from the county general fund handled by the auditor/treasurer. GC Section 27008 requires that the auditor certify all claims against the county while 27005 sets forth the treasurer's role regarding disbursements.

Because of this second set of books it has been all but impossible for the proper allocation to the various departments of the receipts and disbursements. Some reports said Arkens had heard that the former auditor Robert Stark was tough to work with as was the California law. Nathan Black who was elected auditor 2014 after Stark retired after 30 years as the auditor said he was "shocked" by the Gallina audit and not knowing anything about the $10.5 million contract and the related debt.

A few months after the Gallina audit, the Sutter BOS advised Arkens with the proper 120-day notice (actually about five months in this case as the notice was given in early September

2015) that his three-year CAO contract was not going to be renewed. So what did Arkens do? He used up about 40 days of leave and stopped showing up at the county. He will be paid through this month.

How does this apply to El Dorado County? It was Combs who took a fee to find for Sutter County a new CAO three years ago and this was the best he could do? Guess who our BOS gave the job to lead the recruitment for our new CAO? That's right, the same Larry Combs. Last Monday was the NFL's "Black Friday" where almost every failed NFL coach was given his walking papers. Combs has a worse record, especially if his entire history is evaluated. Yet who does our BOS hire for the job? The biggest loser (no offense meant to the TV show where individuals work their butt off to be "the biggest loser").

You can bet that the chances of getting a qualified, non-dictatorial candidate that has the entire county's best interests in mind, one who follows law, regulation and procedure, one who appoints and hires not their friends, one who does not play the game of government musical chairs, one who demands hard work and works hard themselves, one who does not tolerate feather bedding, one who creates complete transparency and demands absolute honesty, one who will not use lawyers to facilitate cover-ups, one who reports clearly to the BOS with no favoritism among BOS members and one who will do proper background checks (something that hasn't happen for at least six years) will never happen as long as Combs is involved in any way with the selection process. If past experience is how we predict future performance, Combs is absolutely disqualified.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.

Opinion: When California sterilized 20,000 citizens

By Alexandra Minna Stern

Not too long ago, more than 60,000 people were sterilized in the United States based on eugenic laws. Most of these operations were performed before the 1960s in institutions for the so-called “mentally ill” or “mentally deficient.”

In the early 20th century across the country, medical superintendents, legislators, and social reformers affiliated with an emerging eugenics movement joined forces to put sterilization laws on the books. Such legislation was motivated by crude theories of human heredity that posited the wholesale inheritance of traits associated with panoply of feared conditions such as criminality, feeblemindedness, and sexual deviance. Many sterilization advocates viewed reproductive surgery as a necessary public health intervention that would protect society from deleterious genes and the social and economic costs of managing “degenerate stock.” From today’s vantage point, compulsory sterilization looks patently like reproductive coercion and unethical medical practice.

At the time, however, sterilization both was countenanced by the U.S. Supreme Court (in the 1927 Buck v. Bell case) and supported by many scientists, reformers, and law-makers as one prong of a larger strategy to improve society by encouraging the reproduction of the “fit” and restricting the procreation of the “unfit.” In total, 32 U.S. states passed sterilization laws between 1907 and 1937, and surgeries reached their highest numbers in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Beginning in the 1970s, state legislatures began to repeal these laws, finding them antiquated and discriminatory, particularly toward people with disabilities.

Of the 60,000 sterilizations in the United States, California performed one-third, or 20,000, of them, making the Golden State the most aggressive sterilizer in the nation. Ten years ago, I published a book that explores the history of eugenics and sterilization in California, but I was frustrated that my research had yielded so little information about the state's extensive sterilization program. I knew next to nothing about the thousands of Californians sterilized in institutions such as Sonoma, Mendocino, and Patton, all located in rural, remote parts of the state.

Who were these people? Why were they committed to institutions and then deprived of their reproductive autonomy? What was the demographic composition of those sterilized? Were certain groups of people disproportionately targeted? What about their families, interests, and lives, in and outside of the institution?

In 2007, I finally found crucial pieces of the historical puzzle. At the administrative offices of the state's Department of Mental Health (now Department of State Hospitals), which had directed the state's sterilization program decades earlier, a secretary pointed me to a standard-issue gray metal filing cabinet. Inside, I found a box with some microfilm reels. Squinting at the small dark font on the negative strips, I could make out the words "Sterilization Recommendation."

In total, I located 19 microfilm reels containing thousands of documents dating from 1919 to 1952 (the most active years of sterilization), which had been preserved in the 1970s when the paper files were discarded. Several years ago, I was able to launch a project with a team of students and researchers at my institution, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, to create a dataset that contains all these records in de-identified and coded form. Data entry has been a protracted and demanding process, taking nearly three years, but ultimately we created a dataset containing 19,995 patient records.

Our dataset reveals that those sterilized in state institutions often were young women pronounced promiscuous; the sons and daughters of Mexican, Italian, and Japanese immigrants, frequently with parents too destitute to care for them; and men and women who transgressed sexual norms. Preliminary statistical analysis demonstrates that during the peak decade of operations from 1935 to 1944 Spanish-surnamed patients were 3.5 times more likely to be sterilized than patients in the general institutional population.

Laws that govern the use of medical records require that we redact personal information to protect patient privacy. Even though we will never be able to divulge the real names or precise circumstances of the 20,000 people sterilized in California, we can still see the ugly underside of medical paternalism and how authorities treated Mexican-Americans, African-Americans, immigrant groups, and people with disabilities and mental illnesses in 20th-century America.

Consider the following stories:

In 1943, a 15-year-old Mexican-American boy we will call Roberto was committed to the Sonoma State Home, an institution for the "feebleminded" in Northern California. Roberto's journey to Sonoma began the previous year when he was picked up by the Santa Barbara Police for a string of infractions that included intoxication, a knife fight, and involvement with a "local gang of marauding Mexicans." Citing his record of delinquency and "borderline" IQ score of 75, the officials at Sonoma recommended that Roberto be sterilized.

Roberto's father adamantly, and unsuccessfully, opposed his son's sterilization, and went so far as to secure a priest to protest the operation. Again and again, the records reveal that many Mexican-American families like Roberto's resisted compulsory sterilization, seeking support from the Catholic Church, the Mexican Consulate, and legal aid societies. On occasion, family members were able to stop or forestall the

operation; in most cases, however, medical superintendents would simply override such protestations and proceed with surgery.

Four years later, the relatives of Hortencia, a young African-American woman held in Pacific Colony in Spadra, California, contacted the NAACP to make a strong case against her sterilization. They halted the surgery with threats of high-profile legal action, even though this meant Hortencia was not permitted to leave the institution.

At the same time, we found that many parents and guardians consented to the sterilization of their loved ones. Silvia, a Mexican-American mother of a toddler, was 20 years old when she was placed in Pacific Colony in 1950. She was assessed with an "imbecile" IQ of 35 and reportedly had been raised in a violent home. Silvia's mother ostensibly could not control her daughter and approved her sterilization.

Fifteen years earlier, Timothy, a white 25-year old placed in Stockton because of same-sex encounters since boyhood and a psychiatric diagnosis of "dementia praecox, hebephrenic type," consented to his own reproductive surgery, perhaps because he knew that it was a potential ticket out of the facility or because he felt it would help him control his pathologized sexual desires.

In contrast, Mark, a white clergyman committed to Patton (a hospital for the "mentally ill") for "dementia praecox, catatonic type," wrote to officials in Sacramento in 1947 that he was "religiously opposed" to his own vasectomy. Records indicate that by speaking up for himself Mark persuaded authorities against the recommended vasectomy.

Taken together, these experiences illuminate, often in poignant detail, an era when health officials controlled with impunity the reproductive bodies of people committed to institutions. Superintendents wielded great power and

proceeded with little accountability, behaving in a fashion that today would be judged as wholly unprofessional, unethical, and potentially criminal. We hope our project can restore the dignity and individuality of people such as Roberto, Hortencia, and Mark, who were subjected to this kind of dehumanization.

This history remains relevant, considering a more contemporary episode of sterilization abuse, again in California's public institutions. Although the state's eugenic sterilization law was repealed in 1979, existing legislation provided leeway for operations in state prisons pursuant to a strict set of criteria. Between 2006 and 2010, 146 female inmates in two of California's women's prisons received tubal ligations that ran afoul of these criteria; at least three dozen of these unauthorized procedures directly violated the state's own informed consent process. The majority of these female inmates were first-time offenders, African-American or Latina. Echoing the rationale of the eugenicists who championed sterilization in the 1930s, the physician responsible for many of these operations blithely explained they would save the state a great deal of money "compared to what you save in welfare paying for these unwanted children—as they procreated more." In 2013, an intrepid journalist at the Center for Investigative Reporting broke this story and it eventually led to the passage of a bill banning sterilization in California state prisons.

These revelations demonstrate that, even in our age of bioethics and awareness of the wrongs of medical experimentation, we are not immune from the conditions that facilitated compulsory sterilization in the mid-20th century: lack of institutional oversight, presumptions that certain members of society are not "fit" to reproduce, and overzealous and biased physicians. The documents we found certainly contain historical lessons for the present and starkly remind us that we should never forget the past.

Alexandra Minna Stern is professor of American culture, obstetrics and gynecology, women's studies, and history at the University of Michigan. A new edition of her book "Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in America" was published in December 2015.

Opinion: Racial attitudes divide political parties

By Sean McElwee, Al Jazeera America

Barack Obama's presidency has been marked by heated debates about the Republican Party's racial attitudes. Many liberals have noted the dog whistles —subtle cues that play on stereotypes and may trigger taboo sentiments — employed in Republican attacks on the president. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, for instance, famously called Obama a "food stamp president," former Sen. Rick Santorum accused him of giving welfare to "blah people," and many conservatives have claimed Obama couldn't have been born in the United States.

For the most part, the public abhors and condemns such blatant racism. But recent data on public sentiments suggest that many Americans hold beliefs affirming subtler, structural racism and that the popularity of these believes divides sharply along party and political lines.

I began my examination of whether there is a partisan divide on racial issues with the American National Election Studies 2012 survey. The first set of questions I examined measures racial stereotyping, asking respondents whether they believe that black people are "hard-working" or "lazy," "intelligent" or "unintelligent" and whether they have "too much influence"

or “too little influence” in politics – in other words, questions measuring explicitly racist attitudes.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Why does the media ignore high school activism?

By Aaron G. Fountain Jr., Al Jazeera America

Student activism has made a comeback. With recent campus demonstrations against alleged racial discriminationand in favor of free college tuition, America may be facing a wave of student protest to a degree not seen since the 1960s. But while the media focuses on college campuses, very few journalists are acknowledging the activism that has been occurring at the high school level. Just in the past year, high school students across the country have protested against racist police brutality, curriculum changes, budget cuts, the expansion of charter schools, standardized tests and other youth-related issues.

After the white police officers responsible for the 2014 deaths of unarmed black men Michael Brown and Eric Garner were not indicted, high school students across the country organized solidarity protests in Seattle; New York; Denver; Oakland; Minneapolis and Boston. In February, about 250 high school students in Santa Fe, New Mexico left school to protest constant testing and the state’s new mandated exam. In June, Milwaukee high school students walked out of class to protest against the county executive takeover of low-performing schools. And this fall, high school students in Allentown, Pennsylvania, organized a district-wide student walkout

demanding the resignation of the superintendent, the inclusion of a student representative on the school board and summer youth employment opportunities. There were also student walkouts in Chicago; Berkeley, and Philadelphia that occurred this fall.

High school activism is not limited to disruptive activities. Numerous youth organizations operate around the country to tackle issues concerning school closures, at-risk youth and the school-to-prison pipeline, among others.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Let's face it, California is nuts

By Joe Mathews

My fellow Californians, the state of our state is nuttier than ever.

I know you will hear more conventional assessments of the state of things in the coming weeks. January is the high season for elected officials to offer addresses on how our state is faring—overviews of California and its local governments. And, to be clear, I am not judging the sanity of Californians (we have lower rates of mental illness than the U.S). Nor am I referring merely to the growth in our almond and walnut production.

Joe Mathews

I offer my assessment of our essential nuttiness as a starting point for a year in which we will debate and cast votes on our taxes, drug laws, schools, roads, our rails, and water. As we figure things out, let us not lean too heavily on reason, or appeal too often to common sense. After all, this state—with its peculiar history of rapid change—has never been a particularly reasonable or sensible place.

So when things make no sense in the coming year, take comfort in the words of the writer Edward Abbey: “There is science, logic, reason; there is thought verified by experience. And then there is California.”

We have been so singular for so long that California has become obsessed with singularity—and even afraid of “the singularity,” the idea that artificial intelligences will eventually surpass our own, dooming humanity. When Gov. Jerry Brown gives his own State of the State address, there likely will be a predictable list of California singular-status boasts: as a leader in renewable energy, high-speed rail, protecting undocumented immigrants, and fighting climate change.

Such policies are to be celebrated. They also are the fruits of our perceived nuttiness—other states have rejected high-speed rail cap-and-trade for greenhouse gas emissions as irretrievably wacky ideas.

You won’t hear this month’s official speechmakers talk about the other half of the nut—the way our nuttiness can turn on

itself.

Ours is a state of creative communities and people that is ruled from Sacramento via the most centralized regime of regulation and taxation in the United States.

California has the highest percentage of its population living in poverty of any state in the country, and yet our leaders pursue policies that give us some of the most expensive electricity, gas, and housing in America. We embrace freedom and restrict it in the same breath. Californians are on our way to legalizing marijuana—but good luck finding a place in the state where you can smoke it, or anything else. The state is pioneering self-driving cars—even as we let our roads deteriorate into impassable messes.

We've led the way in expanding health insurance for poor people—roughly half of our children are now on Medi-Cal, California's version of Medicaid—but at the same time, we've made it harder for people to see a doctor and get treatment. California desperately needs more college graduates—we'll be short a million skilled workers by the middle of the next decade—so, naturally, we've been under-funding public higher education and limiting enrollment in our colleges.

We Californians also have a nutty weakness for empty and extravagant promises. We spend years on Elon Musk's waiting lists for Teslas he can never seem to deliver in the promised numbers. We invest billions in the trivial—how many online coupon companies and photo-sharing apps does one state need? And we overdo it. CalPERS wants to lower its expected rate of investment return to 6.5 percent (just a year after it said it could guarantee 7.5 percent). Our governments are still offering billions in retiree health care—without setting aside money to fund it—even in an age when Medicare and Obamacare should cover all.

This year, you'll hear lots of big talk about how we'll reform

our crazily complicated criminal justice and tax systems. We should reform, though we probably won't. A place as nutty as this needs simpler rules, not 5,000 separate criminal provisions and over 400 penalty enhancements.

I could go on—take note that I've gone this far in a column about California nuttiness without once mentioning San Francisco—but what's the point? While our nuttiness has its costs, California will survive. And we'll cope, as we always do, by celebrating how crazily creative we are.

As Compton's Kendrick Lamar will rap at this new year's Grammys when he wins a boatload of awards, "We gon' be alright. Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright."

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square.

Opinion: Modern sagebrush rebels recycle old Western fantasies

By Paul Larmer, High Country News

Ammon and Ryan Bundy, sons of scofflaw Nevada rancher Clive Bundy, appear to have made an ambitious New Year's resolution: Force the federal government, which has managed more than half of the American West's lands for the past century, to relinquish them, at gun point if necessary, to the locals.

Over the weekend, the Bundy brothers and a group of a few dozen or so militiamen and their sympathizers took over the headquarters of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in

eastern Oregon and declared it a safe haven for well-armed "patriots" who oppose federal land management.

The group is demanding that the federal government release local ranchers Dwight Hammond and his son, Stephen, who are scheduled to report to federal prison this week to finish serving time for intentionally setting fires in 2001 and 2006, burning up hundreds of acres of public lands. They also want the government to hand over the 1.7 million-acre Malheur National Forest. According to OregonLive, Ryan Bundy said, "many would be willing to fight – and die, if necessary – to defend what they see as constitutionally protected rights for states, counties and individuals to manage local lands."

Read the whole story

Opinion: Can books build community?

By Cati Porter

Ahtziri and I are sitting on a stone garden bench outside the church in Riverside where my children take piano lessons. In her hand is a stack of papers—typed forms for me to sign, neatly handwritten manuscript pages, and sketches of fictional characters with names and biographical information.

I have been asked to mentor Ahtziri, a 17-year-old high school senior, through the process of writing a novel for her AP English class. I am not a novelist, but I am a poet, and I direct a nonprofit—the Inlandia Institute—whose mission is to support literary activity, in all of its forms, throughout inland Southern California, aka the Inland Empire or I.E. The

Inland Empire has been in the news a lot lately, with the most recent mass shooting and largest terror attack on U.S. soil since Sept. 11 taking place here. But we are far more than a news headline.

Until the recent shootings in San Bernardino, the Inland Empire was largely unknown, and until the Inlandia Institute was formed, it lacked a cohesive literary identity, unlike Los Angeles or other major metropolitan areas, despite its long history of literary excellence. I was drawn to Inlandia because its mission so closely meshes with my own priorities: as a writer who calls this place home, as a mother who wants to see more opportunities for young people to engage their creativity, and as a locavore reader who wants to read and support local writers. I want more people to know and understand this region that I love, and the best way I know to do that is by seeing it through the eyes of the people who live here.

Which is why I've agreed to mentor Ahtziri. And why the Inlandia Institute wants to build community by supporting creative literacy—fostering creative thinking and problem solving through narrative and storytelling—throughout inland Southern California.

Like any other group, a community of readers and writers doesn't spring up overnight; it grows gradually over the decades as people with a similar mindset find one another and begin to lay a foundation. But sometimes a catalyst comes along, and suddenly there is momentum. In the case of Inlandia, that catalyst was the publication of an anthology that recognized the depth and breadth of the literary writing by and about this region: "Inlandia: A Literary Journey through California's Empire", which Heyday published in 2006.

"Inlandia" stacks greats such as Joan Didion and John Steinbeck and Norman Mailer alongside local jewels like novelist Susan Straight, who sets many of her stories in the

fictional Rio Seco, a doppelgänger of Riverside; American Book Award winner Juan Delgado, whose poems evoke and celebrate the lives of the Mexican-American residents of San Bernardino; and Gordon Johnson, a Native American newspaper columnist for Riverside's Press-Enterprise who writes with frank humor and grace about life on the reservation. The anthology elevated the lives of the people here, and put the Inland Empire, quite literally, on the "map"—now anyone around the country can pick up this book and gain an understanding of what it's like to live here, and what the region is like.

The nonprofit Inlandia began as a collaboration of the Riverside Public Library and Heyday to create cultural and literary events that celebrate the region's writers and offer creative literary enrichment opportunities for people of all ages. Early projects included an ongoing series of writing workshops, programs in the schools, workshops for seniors on writing their life story, seminars on the "Business of Being a Writer," and book readings and signings. By 2009, the program was so successful that it became an independent organization. A mission statement was drawn up to clearly define its footprint as the entire inland region (including Riverside and San Bernardino counties and parts of neighboring Imperial and Inyo counties), and to focus on five core programs: adult creative literacy, publications, public literary events, children's creative literacy, and a literary laureate program.

That was the year I got involved with Inlandia. I was invited to present my work for an Inlandia author series at the library downtown, where I met Marion Mitchell-Wilson, the nonprofit's first executive director. Marion thought my writing, publishing, and literary event experience would be a good fit for Inlandia. Soon she created a part-time coordinator position for me, which expanded over time, from founding a literary journal and running events to facilitating book publication, grant writing, and managing daily operations. When Marion was diagnosed with breast cancer, she

asked if I would keep everything running until she got better. I couldn’t say no.

Marion underwent treatment, came back, found the cancer had returned, and left again; she came back one last time before learning that the breast cancer was back yet again and had metastasized to her bones, liver, and brain. Within a matter of months, she had succumbed. But before she died, she called some of the people involved with Inlandia into her home and made a dramatic request: She wanted us to found an endowment in her name to ensure the continuity of the organization for decades to come. We raised $100,000 in six weeks.

Building a literary community is not just about reading and writing; like any community, it is only as good as its people. People tend to unite in celebration of a cause they feel passionate about. That’s what I believe happened with the endowment.

The people are also the reason I keep working with Inlandia. Over the past few years, I have had the privilege of collaborating with UC Riverside professor and current U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera (who coined the term “Inlandia” in the first place) on a variety of projects, including a guerrilla-style poetry reading on the downtown Riverside pedestrian mall during the lunch hour, and an event at the Smiley Library in Redlands to collect poems for his unity poem.

Inlandia serves a vast swath of inland cities, from the Salton Sea to Temecula, from Wrightwood to Mecca. I am very attached to this region, where I’ve spent the better part of my adult life, even after living in places where the arts have deeper roots. But what the region lacks in deep roots it makes up for in diversity—both ethnic and socioeconomic—and its residents have a great appreciation for that. We are not San Francisco or Los Angeles, but we, too, have world-class museums and cultural events and spacious, beautiful libraries. And we have

pride.

As I write this, I am surrounded by poems submitted to our "Poetry Box" during Riverside's Long Night of Arts and Innovation, an event downtown and sponsored by the city of Riverside every two years. The event brings together innovators in technology alongside arts and cultural organizations to showcase what Riverside has to offer. (Riverside's tagline is the "City of Arts and Innovation.") The Poetry Box was a space for people to play with words—to cut up and rearrange them into poetry on a large felt board, to add to a collaborative poem in a single notebook, or just to write with pens on blank paper. It was surprising to see how many people stopped, sat down, put pen to paper, and wrote a poem, some for the first time. The Poetry Box got to the core of what Inlandia is all about—building community, one word at a time.

I love who we are, we Inlandians—and I revel in all of the places we've come from or have yet to go. I think of Ahtziri—wonder whether or not she will finish her novel. But you know what? The finishing doesn't matter. It's the starting that counts, and I don't just want to see how the story ends. I want to see where it takes her.

Cati Porter is author of the poetry collections "Seven Floors Up" and "My Skies of Small Horses", founder and editor of "Poemeleon: A Journal of Poetry," and executive director of the Inlandia Institute.

"Living the Arts" is an arts engagement project of Zócalo Public Square and The James Irvine Foundation.

Letter: MontBleu helps at Bread & Broth

To the community,

There’s nothing like having a hearty and tasty meat loaf dinner to make you feel like you’re eating at home. Thanks to the Adopt A Day of Nourishment sponsor MontBleu and our hardworking B&B volunteer cooks that is exactly what B&B’s dinner guests enjoyed at the Dec. 28 evening dinner. The meat loaf was a big hit and despite big first serving portions, when second serving was announced, many diners returned for a second helping.

“This is an amazing program,” said Michelle Bergstrom, MontBleu’s director of administration. “We are grateful to be able to participate in providing this dinner and give back to our community.”

Bergstrom and Ginny Shannon, MontBleu’s controller, joined the B&B volunteers at 3pm to help with the dinner’s setup and manned the serving line, greeting the guests and doling out hefty servings. Then these two energetic and helpful women stayed to help with the dinner’s cleanup.

Bread & Broth would like to sincerely thank MontBleu for its generous $250 AAD donation and Bergstrom and Shannon for giving their personal time to take the opportunity to help food insecure community members. Through their generosity, MontBleu and its sponsor crewmembers helped make many lives a little bit better by providing a nutritious and filling meal.

For more B&B information, go **online** or find us on Facebook.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth

Opinion: How we saved the middle class in the 1980s

By Michael Bernick

It’s easy to think that in the world of employment and anti-poverty programs, nothing ever changes, that the same joblessness continues as the government spends billions.

I know this isn’t true. For the past two years, I’ve worked with archivists to sifting through old files and records on employment from the 1970s and 1980s. The work is part of a California State Library research effort to catalogue employment-training strategies in California. I have worked in and with local job-training projects in California since 1979, and the archival project involved my papers on job training and employment programs and the papers of other practitioners and researchers over the past four decades. For the 1970s and 1980s, we collected hundreds of reports and articles about specific projects aimed at youth illiteracy and unemployment, retraining laid off workers, and welfare-to-work approaches.

That era feels very familiar, since people were worried about the same big issues that we are now—growing wage inequality, the hollowing out of the middle class, chronic unemployment. But it’s also encouraging, since our responses to those big problems back then actually made a difference.

The 1970s and 1980s are a peculiar and urgent time to visit via an archival time machine. Papers were being written about the elimination of middle-class jobs, particularly manufacturing jobs available to workers without college degrees. Rising teenage pregnancy rates and welfare rolls fueled predictions of increased urban violence and a growing

“underclass.” There was fear that technology was eliminating jobs in all sectors; in a 1984 report, “Forecasting the Impact of New Technologies on the Future Job Market,” Stanford researchers Russell Rumberger and Henry Levin warned that the high-tech sector was creating a relatively small number of jobs, and was unlikely to be a major employer in the future.

None of the specters of those days has materialized, though. Welfare rolls have dropped dramatically, as have teen pregnancy rates. Job growth has outpaced job loss due to technology and other forces. The middle class has shrunk by some indicators, but remains robust, and new mid-level jobs are being created.

Where did we go right? There is no one answer. Success came as a result of a complex mix of influences: government, private sector, and volunteer education and training programs; demographic shifts; macro-economic policies. But that’s not enough of an explanation. All the improvements are linked in ways to a dynamic that too rarely gets mentioned in policy discussions: the willingness of people (policymakers, practitioners, and ordinary citizens) to stand up to then-dominant ideologies and refuse to be paralyzed when problems are described as intractable.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the consensus on welfare held that expanding government benefit programs was inevitable, that entrepreneurship would be replaced by the collaboration of big government and big private-sector companies, and that the country’s employment future lay in a model of big government, big labor, and big private sector companies. It was a consensus adopted by top officials in government, private foundations, large nonprofits, and the prominent think tanks of the time.

How was this consensus broken? Slowly, by people on the left and the right challenging the establishment. Welfare reform only began its first steps when a few elected Democratic

officials in Sacramento, such as then-state Sen. John Garamendi, were willing to break ranks and establish welfare time limits and redirect welfare agencies to become job placement agencies. Eventually, a different way of approaching welfare took hold—one that aggressively pushed welfare recipients into the work world. Caseloads dropped from 900,000 cases in 1996 to fewer than 500,000 in 2004. The next eight years to fewer than 500,000 cases by July 2004.

And while deindustrialization and technology produced the envisioned job losses, they also produced unexpected job gains that replaced the losses.

The main driver of job growth since that era has been entrepreneurship, that supposedly disappearing value. Its promotion came not from the federal government or elites connected with employment strategies, but from non-profits such as the Corporation for Enterprise Development, minority business development groups, and local community development corporations pushed forward strategies on local levels emphasizing entrepreneurship such as the expansion of inner-city loan funds, and purchasing networks for fledgling businesses. The developing market-oriented think tanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation, identified the tax changes and culture changes necessary for entrepreneurship to expand. George Gilder's 1981 best-seller "Wealth and Poverty" was also crucial in creating an argument and language to explain the value of entrepreneurship.

The history of the past three decades in California shows that in the areas of welfare, teen pregnancy, job growth, and new business generation, improvement is possible. But there is no room for complacency. Today, California's foundations, social welfare nonprofits, and government entities continue to be led by persons who see their role as expanding government benefit programs or adding free community college or other free goods to reduce income inequality or poverty. These approaches, not

anchored to employment, business growth, or entrepreneurship, won’t have any more success than similar programs of the 1960s and 1970s.

Today’s job training and anti-poverty practitioners and policymakers rarely study the efforts of previous decades. That’s unfortunate, and the California State Library archival project is aimed at showing how much there is to learn from the past. We will need to keep to true to the values that drove our social and economic successes of the past three decades. If we do so, we’ll be able to revisit our archives of today’s records in another 30 years, and see that, once again, we made progress.

Michael Bernick is the former director of California’s labor department, the Employment Development Department, and has been involved in job training and placement since 1979. He currently is a Milken Institute Fellow and a Zócalo contributing editor.