

# ENCINO SUN

FERCELY LOCAL

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DECEMBER 23-29, 2006

## SUNDIAL Community CALENDAR Community

### Worship Services at First Presbyterian

First Presbyterian Church of Encino will offer three worship services on Dec. 24. Regular Sunday morning service, 10am; Pastor Curtis Webster will preach on the Magnificat (Luke 1:47-55). The annual Christmas Eve Worship will take place at 4pm, and the annual Candlelight Christmas Eve Worship will be held at 11pm. Communion will be served at both the 4 and 11pm services. 4963 Balboa Boulevard in Encino. (818) 788-1147

### Fashion Square Holiday Events

Santa is available for photos through Dec. 24. 14006 Riverside Drive, Sherman Oaks

### Forro For All at Skirball

Rob Curto's Forro for All is the third concert in the series "Compressing the World," showcasing the accordion across cultures and musical styles. The New York-based band plays a unique style of dance music from Northeast Brazil. Debuts Jan. 11, 8pm. \$30 General, \$25 Skirball members, \$20 full-time students. 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd. (866) 468-3399 or www.ticketweb.com for tickets.

### Campo de Cahuenga

A re-enactment of the signing of the Articles of Capitulation at Campo de Cahuenga. The event will feature fiesta dancers, firing of the Howitzer Cannon, a tour of the archeological dig and more. Jan 14, 1 - 2:15pm. 3919 Lankershim Blvd.

### Encino Community Center Classes

Winter classes run for ten weeks beginning the week of January 7. 4935 Balboa Blvd. Call Lee Marks. (818) 995-1690. www.laparks.org/valley/encino.htm

### Encino Neighborhood Council

Meets the fourth Wednesday of every month. Next meeting, January 24. 7pm at the Encino Community Center. 4935 Balboa Blvd. (818) 255-1040. www.encinocouncil.org

### Homeowners of Encino

Meets annually, or on an as-needed basis. Contact President Gerald Silver at gsilver4@earthlink.net

### Encino Property Owners Association

Public meetings twice yearly. (818) 981-0474

### Encino Chamber of Commerce Events

Business and Professional lunch, mixers and meetings. (818) 789-4711. www.encinochamber.org. (818) 704-0153

### Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) Course

Ethics and Open Government Training for Neighborhood Councils is available online and at workshops throughout Dec. The course fulfills all requirements set out in AB1234, which requires local agency officials to complete two hours of ethics training on specific topics no later than December 31. Visit www.lacityneighborhoods.com

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# Very Important Players team unites special needs children through soccer

BY LYNN MILLS

The crowd cheered as grinning, nine-year-old Liam dribbled toward the goal and kicked the ball square into the net. Parents, teammates, referee – even the goalie and the rest of the other team high-fived him.

In this era of supercharged children's sports this scene might sound unusual, but for the Very Important Players (VIP) in Encino, it's just another fun game.

The VIP program, the first of its kind in the San Fernando Valley, is a division of American Youth Soccer Organization's (AYSO) Region 33. It uniquely fields teams made up of children with special needs, giving them a chance to get out and compete at Balboa Park.

While disagreements and discord sometimes flare up during an overwrought game on a field nearby, the VIP games are an oasis of what's best about sports. It's the only place where players, parents, coaches, referees and opponents smile enthusiastically throughout the game – and afterwards.



VIP athletes (in blue) scrimmage.

Parents praise the program for giving their kids an enjoyable activity to look forward to, and say the exercise has helped improve their coordination. Several say their children have developed the ability to do more for themselves since participating in VIP.

Karen Gaytan says the program has totally changed her nine-year-old son Alfredo's

life. "He has a lot of confidence in himself. He fights for the ball and he is learning to be a team player, to let other kids also play."

She relates that Alfredo, who has high-functioning autism, has a lot more friends at school now. "When they have autism, they see life in a box. VIP is really helping him get out of that little box," says

Gaytan. "He's learning, and he's opening his little box to let people come in and out. He has improved from not being able to play, to being able to play with the regular kids [at school] now."

Gaytan says watching Alfredo play VIP has also had an effect on his older brother, Frederico, who plays soccer in a club league.

"At the beginning, he was, 'I don't want my brother to be there,' and now he's like, 'Okay, next year, I'm going to be a buddy,'" a VIP on-field helper. "Now that he sees this group, he has developed compassion."

For the first time, Alfredo and Frederico play soccer at home together like other siblings. "I get better and better

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## Local politicians urge vigilance against restaurant robberies

BY ANA KACZMAREK

City Councilmember Dennis Zine joined Assembly member Lloyd Levine, Councilmember Wendy Gruel, the California Restaurant Association and the LAPD at the West Valley Police Station on December 11 to address the recent series of masked restaurant robberies along Ventura Boulevard.

The gathering featured detailed explanations of the patterned robberies, whose two separate perpetrators have been dubbed "The El Torito Bandit" and the "Ski Mask Bandits." Zine announced a \$75,000 reward for information that could lead to the crim-

inals' capture, and promised the restaurant owners present that he would renew that reward until they were caught.

"There's a criminal element out there that is also pervasive and persistent and ever-present and they're looking at all of your businesses," said LAPD Deputy Chief for the San Fernando Valley Michael Moore. He urged restaurant managers to implement specific safety tactics at their businesses to help deter such incidents.

"These folks have done a lot of harm to a lot of people,"

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## Winter Solstice Festival ♦ Gift Guide



**VIP TEAM** from page 1 because my brother teaches me," Alfredo says proudly.

AYSO has had its VIP program for about a decade, and there are now an estimated 100 programs nationwide. Region 33 boys' commissioner Steve Poretsky spearheaded adopting the program in Encino four years ago.

"We had almost 2,000 players here every Saturday at the park, and as boys' commissioner, we had children with special needs that I had to turn away to other parks [that had VIP programs] because they just weren't going to succeed on a mainstream

team here," Poretsky recalls. "I realized that we should start our own program."

They had 36 players the first year, and that number has since nearly doubled.

The minimum age to participate is four-and-a-half, but there is no upward age limit, so even special needs adults can play. The bulk of the players have autism, ADD, or ADHD, but there have been players with cerebral palsy, visual and hearing impairments, Muscular Dystrophy, Downs Syndrome, developmental delays and other challenges.

No one is turned away. They use special equipment when

needed, such as padding for wheelchairs, or balls with bells inside for the visually impaired.

Just like any other team, VIP teams have uniforms, play on regulation fields, and have coaches and referees. Players are assisted by "buddies," usually older kids from mainstream teams who are matched up with a player one-on-one for the entire season. Buddies shadow the player on the field, offering instruction and encouragement, and as Poretsky says, "They develop a marvelous relationship with the player over the course of the season."

Both parents and coaches commend the buddies who as-



Assisting with technique.

sist the players. Some do it for high school community service requirements, but others, like fourteen-year-old Julian Ozen – a buddy for four years – do it out of the goodness of their hearts.

"I don't really know what made me start, but once I had, it was a lot of fun. I come back each week because it's always nice to see the buddies there. They're always excited to see you no matter what," says Ozen.

He smiles when recalling the challenges of the first VIP player he assisted. "All he really wanted to do was kick the ball through my legs, so I would move back and he would just follow me un-

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To serve the Canoga Station, the Orange Line has been extended from Variel Av to Canoga Av.

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**VIP TEAM** from page 9

til I finally got to the goal and he'd want to shoot by himself."

Each week, a mainstream team - boys or girls, 11 years old and up - is matched to play against a co-ed VIP team.

"We brief those players before the game in terms of understanding the VIP players. The mainstream kids get it very quickly," says Poretzky. "They know that the VIP team is out there to have fun first and foremost, to learn something about soccer, to have a social experience, and to get some exercise."

Mainstream opponents generally take it easy on the VIP teams, and they're often the ones who cheer the loudest when a VIP player scores a goal.

Despite physical challenges, some of



Uniting after the game.

the VIP players have marvelous ball handling skills and strong kicks.

Poretzky remembers a child who didn't let his crutches slow him down. "When you look at these players with crutches, one assumes they're going to have a lot of trouble getting around," he notes.

"This one player got out in the middle of the field and started running with these crutches, batting the ball with both his right and his left crutch as he was running, dribbling the ball around other mainstream players. He was fast as a deer. It was amazing, and people would just stop and look at him. It was quite a lesson, I think, to everyone on the field, about making judgments, number one, and number two, about what these kids can accomplish."

Poretzky, now in charge of the VIP program for about 70 regions around Southern California, is working to develop 20 new VIP programs.

"Although we have 70 players here at Balboa Park, children and adults with special needs are estimated to be about 15 percent of the general population. I

don't know what those numbers translate to in the San Fernando Valley, but they're large. VIP is a wonderful program. Everyone has fun and I couldn't recommend it more highly."

Gaytan shares his sentiments. "Everybody learns: the kids that come and help - the buddies - and the kids that have a need.

"I don't call our kids disabled, I call them different. They have different abilities, not disabilities," she continues. "We really need to make sure that the world knows that these kids...they're people just like everybody else." \*

*Encino's Region 33 is currently taking sign-ups for VIP and for all teams for the 2007 spring and fall seasons at [www.ayso33.org](http://www.ayso33.org).*



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# Reseda Boulevard just got Rapid.

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