

Society of Professional Journalists San Diego Pro Chapter
2026 Journalism Awards

Judges' comments

Judges were asked to provide a comment on the first-place winners. Some chose to also give an overall comment or comment on all placements in the category. Below is not a complete list of this year's winners, just the ones for which comments were received. The full list of winners can be found at spjsandiego.org.

Audio — Breaking News Story

First place: "No Kings Day: San Diego"
Phil Farrar (KOGO-AM)

Judge's comment: *"Nice mix of interviews, soundbites and live sounds of the protest event."*

Audio — Business/Consumer Report

First place: "SANDAG exploring Temecula-San Marcos Rapid Bus to ease I-15 congestion"
Alexander Nguyen (KPBS-FM)

Judge's comment: *"Short, informative and perfect. These are the nuggets that consumers of news need, especially as it relates to traffic."*

Audio — Community Services Program or Series

First place: "KPBS Roundtable"
Andrew Bracken, Ashley Rusch and Brooke Chan (KPBS)

Judge's comment: *"I listened to the Roundtable wrap-up for 2025 and also some other segments last year. Very engaging content with a range of expertise. Congratulations to all involved from reporting to production."*

Audio — Feature Series

First place: "In Paradise Hills, a legendary art wall lives again"
Kori Suzuki (KPBS-FM)

Judge's comment: *"The wall as the thread to this story brought everything to life. Excellent job of weaving it all together. Very good read."*

Audio — Feature Story

First place: "Who will be there when they come for you?"
Miriam Raftery (East County Magazine Show on KNSJ Radio)

Judge's comment: *"Insightful interview that not only underscored the level of egregious acts against immigrants by the Trump administration, but also how to help."*

Audio — Newscast

First place: "KOGO: 12-Noon News with Phil Farrar"
Phil Farrar (KOGO-AM)

Judge's comment: *"Very thorough coverage of Memorial Day with a mix of topics to both mark the holiday and show awareness for its meaning."*

Audio — News Story

First place: "Tuskegee Airmen: Shoot Down D.E.I."
Phil Farrar (KOGO-AM)

Judge's comment: *"Very timely and well done, especially hear the voices of the airmen who gave so much for a country that cared so little about them when they returned."*

Audio — Podcast

First place: "One of their own"

Katie Hyson, David Washburn, Emily Jankowski and Liz Hames (KPBS)

Judge's comment: *"This podcast was thorough, heart-breaking and as the family member stated in the final episode, will at least provide a legitimate account of what happened in an era of clickbait 'news.' The family is not likely to get the closure it needs, but someone heard them and listened to them. Tragic doesn't begin to convey what happened. The rush to judgment and loss of evidence should have never happened. This was a tough listen and a very fair one."*

College Media — Arts/Entertainment Story

First place: "National City's immortal 'Angel Baby'"
Alexa Lima (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"Rosie, a National City girl, had the first Chicana hit song and was the first inducted into the Hall of Fame. I loved this dive into music history."*

Overall comment: *"Very competitive category with many cultural influences."*

College Media — Best News Media Website

First place: "Lomabeat.com"

Joy Russell and The Point 2025-26 staff (The Point)

Judge's comment: *"Nice design and compartmentalizing of topics make navigation easy. I like the moving menu of pictures that give a tight opening focus. Also, the Instagram photos give some reader input into the site."*

Overall comment: *"Good competition. Layout of sections tended to be large and therefore clunky to the eye, Compartmentalization seems to make it easier for the viewer to find what he or she is looking for. More is not necessarily better on the cover webpage."*

College Media — Best Newspaper

First place: "The Southwestern College Sun"

The Sun staff (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"This is an exceptional college newspaper by any measure and would perhaps outperform some local professional newspapers. The front page alone — which includes stories on ICE incursions, rodent grievances and deeply-reported stories on LGBTQ refugees stuck in Tijuana — demonstrates sophisticated editorial judgment and a clear mission to serve a Latino-majority community. The refugees feature is high-quality foreign-*

correspondence reporting with compassion and excellent sourcing. The 'Silent but Not Quiet' profile is extraordinary. The photo work is stunning. As always, incredible work!"

Second place: "The Point"

Sydney Brammer, Hailey Snyder, Grace Chaves and The Point 2025-26 staff (The Point)

Judge's comment: *"A genuinely strong student newspaper serving a tight-knit college community with care and range. The Fizz/anonymous app story showed real news instincts and a timely campus safety issue, reported with appropriate sensitivity and an included trigger warning. The writing quality is consistently solid across multiple beats covered: news, features, sports, A&E and opinion. There is good use of photos throughout the layout, and the poetry section design adds great visual variety. Some photos are low-res or tight in print, and a few pieces feel more like campus announcements, but overall very strong work."*

College Media — Column

First place: "Education department flawed but essential" and other columns

Alfonso Julián Camacho (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"Alfonso Camacho has a distinctive op-ed perspective that encouraged me to look at familiar issues in a new way. He's well informed on the national news and policies he writes about. While he approaches each topic from his personal angle and interest, he expands that POV to show readers how these issues are relevant for all of us. Alfonso's voice is fresh and different, his style is mature and engaging, and he has a confident command of each topic he tackles. His knowledge, personal experience, storytelling style and advocacy all add up to professional opinion writing."*

College Media — Feature Photo

First place: "Montse La Maravilla"

Sisy Sannoh (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"Marvelous shot. It was like the photographer was waiting for the right moment."*

Second place: "Pompom powerhouses"

Yanelli Zavina Robles (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"Nice photo of cheerleaders doing what they do best: exciting the fans."*

Third place: "La Familia Mora"

Josh Whitehead (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"Good photo illustrating the Day of the Dead. Captures solemnity but also devotion honoring the deceased."*

Overall comment: *"Excellent competition showing a slice of life in the San Diego area."*

College Media — Feature Series

First place: "Fashion Club series"

Valeryah Lara-Urrea and Dira Marie Wong (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"Writers, photographer and layout person(s) wove an eye-catching fabric. If this didn't catch students' eyes, nothing else would. Good job, Southwestern College Sun."*

College Media — Feature Story

First place: “Tackling textile waste: How fashion in California is becoming more sustainable”
Ava Turner (SDSU School of Journalism and Media Studies)

Judge’s comment: *“Well-written and contextualized examination of a growing retail trend and environmental issue. The story is well-supported by the data provided and discussion of current legislative and other developments on the subject. And a good read too!”*

College Media — Headline Writing

First place: “SPAM calls are welcome” and other headlines
Yanelli Zavina Robles (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“Very informative and culturally sensitive headline writing. Resisting the urge to make light of SPAM is appreciated. After all, SPAM is an important part of some Asian cuisine. The only critique is a design one. The opening quote begins with a huge quote mark but ends with a small one. Kind of jarring to the eye. Maybe making the end quote mark larger was problematic.”*

College Media — In-depth Reported Story

First place: “San Diego’s phantom stadium costs taxpayers nearly \$5 million annually”
Roman Aguilar and Teal Davis (The Daily Aztec)

Judge’s comment: *“I like the chutzpah from the Daily Aztec. College papers don't usually tell a city to get its act together. This one does.”*

Second place: “Can San Diego keep its climate promises? Budget cuts erode the path to net-zero”

Nate Tubbs (SDSU School of Journalism and Media Studies)

Judge’s comment: *“Good analysis of the city budget.”*

Third place: “SDSU to spend \$1.3M on AI-enabled surveillance cameras”
Teal Davis (The Daily Aztec)

Overall comment: *“Really competitive category with college students raising questions that voters should be thinking about. Good attitude.”*

College Media — Layout & Design

First place: “Fashion Club Elegance”

Andrea Aladin, Carla Labto and Yanelli Zavina Robles (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“Fantastic visual concept! The tape over the photos gives the visual aesthetics of a mood board for fashion and graphic designers.”*

Second place: “Las Chicanas of Chicano Park”

Andrea Aladin (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“The amount of color and presentation in the culture of Chicanas has the reader being absolutely bombarded with visual beauty. Fantastic work!”*

College Media — Multicultural Story

First place: “Borderlands alive honoring the dead”
Alfonso Julián Camacho (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"Love the side-by-side approach between Mexican and English about the annual Day of the Dead celebration."*

Overall comment: *"This competition excels because of the rich diversity of cultures in San Diego."*

College Media — Newscast

First place: "The Daily Aztec Live 11/20"

Emily Barrera and Lindsey Belsky (The Daily Aztec)

Judge's comment: *"Well-rounded newscast with a wide variety of stories, from student news to sports and arts. I liked how you localized a national story (delay in CalFresh payments). You even had actual weather story, in the form of rain, which is often a rarity in San Diego. Good job."*

College Media — News Photo

First place: "Smoke and fire"

Carla Gutierrez (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"These photos show passion and how important the issue of mistreatment of Mexican women is. My only criticism is that I would have liked to know what the signs said."*

Second place: "San Diego State students rally for undocumented rights"

Ysa Garcia (The Daily Aztec)

Judge's comment: *"Photo captures the seriousness of student protesters."*

Overall comment: *"Interesting that this competition drew photos from protests. In all, good photography."*

College Media – News Series

First place: "Rat infestation"

Josh Whitehead and The Sun Staff (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"Excellent coverage of the problem that has besieged this campus. The reporter(s) were thorough to ensure that many voices were included in the report. The union's grievance helped keep the story alive (ongoing) and the newspaper stayed on top of the developments in the story. Eeeek! Are the rats eradicated yet?"*

College Media — News Story

First place: "San Diego universities fight student hunger as CalFresh cuts take effect"

Phoenix Miller (SDSU School of Journalism and Media Studies)

Judge's comment: *"Good piece that translates a national action by the federal government into how it affects San Diego area residents, especially students."*

Overall comment: *"Good coverage of a variety of issues on college campuses."*

College Media — Original Illustration or Cartoon

First place: "Indigenous people targeted by government again"

Carla Labto (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"What an apropos portrayal of whitewashing history. Tells the story without the article."*

Second place: “The make America great dictator”

Carla Labto (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“Clever way of portraying the president as a dictator. Ties in with the article beautifully.”*

Third place: “Defending diversity is the correct move”

Carla Labto (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“Certainly and dramatically drives home the point of Big Brother coming down on colleges and minorities.”*

Overall comment: *“Very competitive category. The illustrations were so good, you almost didn’t have to read the accompanying articles.”*

College Media — Opinion/Editorial

First place: “Is SDSU really the Hispanic-serving institution it claims to be?”

Sarah Sanchez and Yuliana Valdez (The Daily Aztec)

Judge’s comment: *“¿Dónde están los Mexicanos? This well-written opinion finds them tucked in the basement, where Latinx fight for resources the university is supposed to provide, thanks to a federal grant. Backed by statistics and facts, with student voices in the mix, this isn’t merely an opinion. Well done!”*

Second place: “Behavior toward student journalists is unprofessional”

Yanelli Zavina Robles (The Southwestern College Sun)

Third place: “Gun violence steals young Americans’ futures and dreams”

Alexa Lima (The Southwestern College Sun)

Overall comment: *“College students have opinions, and they certainly know how to express them! From exploring how a university is using its federal money for Latinx programs to decrying the lack of respect for student journalists to commemorating a poignant graduation in the wake of campus shootings, students put their best voices forward in articulating problems and looking for solutions.”*

College Media — Photo Essay

First place: “Borderlands alive honoring the dead”

Josh Whitehead, Yanelli Zavina Robles, Luz Maria Clayton, Sisy Sannoh and Natalia Rivera Banuet (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“Love the richness and variation of Day of the Dead celebration.”*

Overall comment: *“Lot of variety of subjects with depth of feeling.”*

College Media — Review/Criticism

First place: “Glorious Gloria”

Toni Gibson (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“What stood about this review was the problems the production faced when actors became sick with the flu and the review had to incorporate the challenges instead of relying on the story line to carry the review.”*

Second place: “Fashion Club Elegance”

Dira Marie Wong (The Southwestern College Sun)

Third place: “Review: Squid Game season two teaches a masterclass in recycling plot points yet capturing the attention of its audience”

Arianna Hull (The Daily Aztec)

Overall comment: *“I know it is daunting to examine a popular movie or video series, but as a consequence it becomes more of a repetition of the story line and characters. Of course, some of that has to be in the review, but what is more important is how the reviewer felt about the production.”*

College Media — Social Media Account

First place: “The Point’s Instagram”

Mackenzie Lackey, Joy Russell and Sydney Brammer (The Point)

Judge’s comment: *“An interesting account with a variety of creative and visually appealing posts that make the followers want to read more on a frequent basis.”*

College Media — Sports Photo

First place: “Tuff N Uff 148”

Dakota Gray (The Daily Aztec)

Judge’s comment: *“Great shot and composition. It seems so real and almost scary to look at.”*

Second place: “Armed and dangerous”

Natalia Rivera Banuet (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“Good photos of water polo match. Maybe just a split second later when the woman was throwing the ball might have been a more emotional shot.”*

College Media — Sports Story

First place: “College loses beloved, eccentric baseball coach”

Alfonso Julián Camacho (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“Great anecdote leading into story obit about Southwestern College’s beloved baseball coach. Crazy like a fox is not usual language for an obit.”*

Second place: “Colleges expand mental health resources as student-athletes face growing demands”

Jenna Fee Feyerabend (SDSU School of Journalism and Media Studies)

Third place: “From bowler to Bowl games”

Julio Rodriguez (The Southwestern College Sun)

Overall comment: *“Strong competition particularly among the first three awards. They all could be interchangeable.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Arts/Entertainment Story (Performing Arts)

First place: “How Ramona’s Bob Knight saved the San Diego Symphony’s 104-year-old organ from impending oblivion — one pipe at a time”

George Varga (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“The so-called Phantom of the Opera is alive and well in San Diego. Well done story on master organ builder, Bob Knight, who is most happy when he is not noticed at a performance.”*

Second place: “Three-time jazz Grammy Award-winner Cécile McLorin Salvant goes from baroque to garage band”

Beth Wood (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Overall comment: *“Good stories from the Union Tribune make it an in-house affair. Excellent writing.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Arts/Entertainment Story (Visual Arts)

First place: “In the curator's words (series)”

Michael Rocha (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge's comment: *“Culture is art and art is culture. Union-Tribune gets to see that through Michael Roche's columns. The piece about the Virgin of Guadalupe and how it is woven into textiles and culture was a bright light.”*

Second place: “Can San Diego's artists step out of our city's shadow?”

Jakob McWhinney (Voice of San Diego)

Third place: “‘Glass in flight': A dance of light and colors at Carlsbad Flower Fields”

Alexander Nguyen (KPBS)

Overall comment: *“The arts scene in San Diego flourishes and so does the work of those who tell regular people about its history and richness.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Breaking News Story

First place: “ICE arrests several workers from South Park restaurant”

Lara McCaffrey (KPBS)

Judge's comment: *“The winning story demonstrated a strong sense of urgency as a breaking news article. Use of the Instagram post help provide a direct voice of the situation. Great use of quotes from witnesses. It captured the fear and frustration of the situation.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Business Story

First place: “Home insurance was already hard to get. Then came L.A.'s fires. Here's what San Diegans need to know.”

Lori Weisberg and Kristen Taketa (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge's comment: *“Excellent story on how much insurance can affect the homeowner. With all the big wildfires, residents have a hard time finding coverage. This article helps them.”*

Second place: “ICE raids push workers into the shadows, disrupting the economy”

Kate Morrissey (Capital & Main)

Third place: “California's last beet sugar plant is closing. Can Imperial County keep the industry alive?”

Kori Suzuki (KPBS)

Overall comment: *“Strong competition. It is amazing how much national politics come into play for business.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Criminal Justice Story

First place: “Murder alleged in fetish sex encounter”

Teri Figueroa (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge's comment: *"What an interesting story. Something went wrong in a consensual sex act show on a website. Was it second-degree murder or involuntary manslaughter? A jury might have to decide."*

Second place: "Some pet owners given wrong ashes as San Marcos pet crematorium abruptly closes"

Karen Kucher (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Third place: "International tribunal condemns U.S. border officials for torturing, killing immigrant"

Kate Morrissey (Capital & Main)

Overall comment: *"Extremely strong competition, especially among the top three stories. Any one of them could have been first or second."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Education Story

First place: "Free speech at issue after U-T deletes, reinstates UCSD student op-ed on Gaza"

Roberto Camacho (Times of San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"A national debate over student expression hits home as a UCSD student's comments about Palestinians in the debate over Gaza take centerstage when her comments were removed from the Union-Tribune's website because a pseudonym was used. Good discussion over free expression on campus."*

Second place: "San Diego Unified's housing push is a big deal. Should it be even bigger?"

Jakob McWhinney (Voice of San Diego)

Third place: "A life-changing youth behavioral program is set to lose funding under Trump"

Carolyne Corelis and Katie Anastas (KPBS)

Overall comment: *"Wide variety of education issues aired in this competition."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Environment Story

First place: "Sea lions and birds sickened as toxic algae bloom reaches San Diego"

Karen Kucher (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge's comment: *"Good alert about sea mammals being sickened by chemical in algae blooms."*

Second place: "National City pledged to reduce pollution. Now it's considering a new industrial biofuel depot"

Kori Suzuki (KPBS)

Third place: "Demolishing of domes next up as decommissioning of San Onofre nears end"

Alexander Nguyen (KPBS)

Overall comment: *"Excellent stories about the environment, obviously an important topic in California."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Feature Story (Light Subject)

First place: "This San Diego cop also trains dolphins at SeaWorld. The police wetsuit says it all."

Teri Figueroa (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge's comment: *"With magazine-worthy language, pacing and flair, Teri Figueroa tells the story of a San Diego SeaWorld dolphin wrangler turned cop and SWAT team member who now"*

spends a day each week leading the dolphin show. There are so many revelations and twists, including a tragic one, where Figueroa could have taken an easy, sentimental, or overwrought turn. She doesn't, letting the details speak for themselves and then well up to paint the portrait of a remarkable human devoted to doing good in two embattled professions while training others to do the same. Figueroa writes fluid sentences and full paragraphs, eschewing the punchy one-sentence/one-paragraph style that is a crutch for many of the entries. Congratulations!"

Second place: "Only a few historic movie theaters remain in San Diego County. These are their stories."

Olivia Petty (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge's comment: *"Olivia Petty's story about the obsessed souls putting their lives and (not great) fortunes on the line to preserve three of San Diego's classic old-style movie palaces is deftly drawn, deeply felt, and delivers an incredible lesson in movie-house economics and preservation in a hard time. It's a romantic world that she captures in precise observations and eloquent language, while giving an idea of the underlying conflicts and philosophies that drive the three dreamers. An important primer for any city with a downtown it's trying to revitalize or preserve. Congratulations!"*

Third place: "I attended the EUSD board meeting so you didn't have to': How parents get you to care about schools in Encinitas"

Katie Futterman (inewssource)

Judge's comment: *"Katie Futterman pulls off a major success here, taking on a difficult, because tedious and often boring, subject — school board meetings. Profiling the parents who attend them and report the results to a community who is apt to overlook the proceedings, she weaves in the cultural clashes that are tearing apart schools and districts across the country —and gives fair and equal time to the countervailing arguments of various proponents. The story does a service of its own, just as Futterman's subjects are doing a service for their fellow parents: it reminds us that we avoid or skip these grassroots institutions like school board meetings at ours, and democracy's peril. The use of graphics and examples of social media are effective, making for a compelling package. Bravo!"*

Overall comment: *"The top three entries had very little room between them. All displayed mastery of the light feature form (even when dealing with not so light moments). They moved to a writer's rhythm and used language with a more than craftsman like touch. All three writers are to be highly commended. Many of the other entries were a bit too enamored of the one-sentence, one-paragraph style of writing, which may be the preferred house style. Yes, it's punchy and guarantees reading on, but it also is deadening and dissipates the reader's focus and emotional connection. But the subjects and characters were portrayed with attention and respect. Thanks for submitting!"*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Feature Story (Serious Subject)

First place: "San Diego musicians reflect, 5 years later, on the pandemic that paused their careers"

George Varga (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge's comment: *"What writing about the effect of COVID-19 on musicians: 'Their livelihoods — like those of other performing artists and people from all walks of life around the world — came to a grinding halt overnight. There were no concerts, no club dates and no recording*

sessions, just that prolonged, soul-sapping silence and an increasingly acute feeling of existential angst about a future in which nothing felt remotely normal or predictable.' Good stuff"

Second place: "I have so much fear that they're going to torture me"
Kate Morrissey (Capital & Main)

Overall comment: *"Some really serious subjects, from careers crippled by COVID-19 to deportation to El Salvador, leading to a tough competition."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Food Story

First place: "Salad instead of scampi? Not in this house, Never a dull meal in this house, How is he supposed to follow doctor's orders?"
Irv Erdos (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Second place: "Food in San Diego airport's new terminal is local, local, local — although there is one McDonald's"
Lori Weisberg (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Overall comment: *"The first entry was very entertaining to read and really had me laughing at key points. I loved the descriptions and it kept my interest because I wanted to see where the next zinger was. The second place was a very good piece because it tells not only what is being served at SAN but the why behind such things as selection and cost."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Government Story

First place: "The San Diego job that councilmembers never approved"
Greg Moran and San Diego Documenters (inewssource)

Judge's comment: *"The reporting team clearly dug deep for their information. Kudos to them for picking out a slender thread of a story out of a nine-hour council meeting. I really admire their investigative skills. It was an easy first place."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Health Story

First place: "With a jar of blood as evidence, detained man tells immigration judge 'I am dying little by little'"
Kate Morrissey (Capital & Main)

Judge's comment: *"It doesn't get any more gripping than this: A man pulls out a jar of blood he lost that day to demonstrate how he was not getting medical treatment for his cancer at the federal immigration detention center in San Diego."*

Second place: "San Diego ER nurse recounts experience as medical crew member in Gaza"
Roberto Camacho (Times of San Diego)

Third place: "California families will face major care challenges as Baby Boomers age"
JW August (Times of San Diego)

Overall comment: *"Wide range of health reporting."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Housing/Development Story

First place: "Using ADUs as San Diego vacation rentals"
Cody Dulaney and Charis Johnston (inewssource)

Judge's comment: *"Good story. Accessory dwelling units are intended to increase housing supply and make things affordable. But then how can they when city officials let ineligible homeowners bypass short-term rental restrictions, making the units attractive to tourists? This article raises good questions."*

Second place: "San Diego might be having its slowest year ever for newly built housing"
Phillip Molnar (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Third place: "San Diego housing data reveal fastest growth in urban core"
Andrew Bowen and Michael Wayne (KPBS)

Overall comment: *"Strong competition on stories about making more affordable housing in an attractive area like San Diego. Good luck."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Housing Insecurity Story

First place: "San Diego is on the hook for monthly \$77,000 payments of shuttered senior shelter"

Lisa Halverstadt (Voice of San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"Nice try to get a rundown motel for homeless seniors, but it proved too much to work out and costs the city \$77,000 a month empty. One step forward, two steps back."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Investigative/Enterprise Series

First place: "Investigating San Diego's sexually violent predator program"

Greg Moran (inewssource)

Judge's comment: *"The prose just flows in this well-written, well-balanced investigative series about a serious issue — the housing of sexually violent predators in San Diego's backcountry. The series shed light on allegations of possible malfeasance in the \$100 million program contracted to a private provider by the state and ended with the replacement of the head of the program that finds housing and monitors sexual predators. Reporting with an impact!"*

Second place: "El Cajon halts some mental health call responses"

Lisa Halverstadt (Voice of San Diego)

Third place: "CARE Court series"

Lisa Halverstadt (Voice of San Diego)

Overall comment: *"All the entries were interesting stories about fascinating topics. This judge favored articles that clearly described an issue and resulted in change."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Investigative/Enterprise Story

First place: "City flagged San Carlos intersection as dangerous, then denied safety improvements for it before child's death"

Calista Stocker (Times of San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"A compelling tale with a tragic ending. The reporter provided a concise background investigation just a week after a schoolchild died at an intersection marked for improvements. Too late for the victim, but the story helped shed light on the problem that the government had been aware of for a year. Now something will get done."*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Multicultural Story

First place: “Spring Arts Preview 2025: Cellist Peter Ko is thriving at UCSD and beyond”

Beth Wood (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“How many cultures can you combine in this Seoul-born cellist who grew up in El Centro and plays a Japanese-composed piece. This says it all: ‘Growing up in El Centro in, I think, a conservative family environment, he came to his audition for the undergraduate music program with a very traditional piece. Over this long period of time, Peter has grown into a completely different musician,’ his teacher said.”*

Second place: “Young music phenom D.K. Harrell lighting up the blues: ‘He has this electricity’”

George Varga (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Third place: “Fear and expulsion: Under Trump, history is poised to repeat itself”

Kate Morrissey (Capital & Main)

Overall comment: *“This is one of the best competitions in the contest. The difference between 1st and 2nd is razor thin. The stories of the two young musicians are so rich and alive.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — News Story

First place: “How a TikTok’s ICE patrol spiraled into a violent confrontation at a trolley stop”

Roberto Camacho (Times of San Diego)

Judge’s comment: *“Well told story filled with intrigue and frustration. The reporter did a good job at providing important context to the story. The reporter did an excellent job at following the process as it unfolded helping the reader to feel like they were there too.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Opinion/Editorial

First place: “California on its own authoritarian path with housing law”

Roman S. Koenig (North Coast Current)

Judge’s comment: *“I liked this from the start to finish. An opinion piece that felt and read like an opinion. Literally entertaining without going into too much of the nuance of the issue, the writer got me to understand the issue, and see what it really is in the context of the larger political dynamics of both the state and the nation. Housing is one of those all-purpose issues that politicians use to sound good to the voter. This writer takes their language and shows exactly what it really means for people. It sounds nice, but will it really improve anything? That is where good opinion pieces hit their sweet spot.”*

Second place: “A century of local history lives, but what of tomorrow?”

Roman S. Koenig (North Coast Current)

Third place: “Opinion on tariffs”

Jan Goldsmith (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Overall comment: *“The selections were interesting to say the least. But there was a distinctive difference between just ‘opinion’ and good expressive opinion and criticism where you could hear the voice of the writer while reading it. Mr. Koenig has nailed that voice and is someone who I would say is still tapping into old time ‘here is what grinds my gears’ type of pieces that used to be the talk of the town when they came out. The ‘Opinion on tariffs’ was good because it was relevant, but it didn’t have the bite that I think it really needed to make on the issues, thus third place.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Profile

First place: “A Republican school board member came out as trans. Then came the calls for resignation”

Jakob McWhinney (Voice of San Diego)

Judge’s comment: *“A sensitive yet straightforward and compelling account of one person's life-changing journey. And most certainly a timely subject.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Review/Criticism

First place: “The Who’s final farewell tour concert was powerful, poignant and unforgettable”

George Varga (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“A very relatable piece of which I had to chuckle when the name of the group ‘The Who’ is really being known as ‘The Two.’ Helped me to get an update on The Who as they enter their 80's.”*

Second place: “Happy Together Tour’s name game: Will The Turtles (the real Turtles) please stand up?”

George Varga (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“It’s a very inside baseball piece of a set of bands. Educational to those who have not heard of the groups.”*

Overall comment: *“It is refreshing to see criticism and comment on concerts still being elevated to this level of work.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Science/Technology Story

First place: “Looking for a pole saw? The National City library has you covered”

Kori Suzuki (KPBS)

Judge’s comment: *“I love this story, The local library goes hi-tech by going low-tech: Lending out tools, power ones, even tillers and cement saws. Very interesting story.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Series

First place: “Someone San Diego Should Know: True turnaround stories”

Jan Goldsmith (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“It's these great stories like the dramatic rise of Tyler De Los Reyes from homeless sleeping under a pier to a good employee of Petco that makes reading this series so good. Or Justine Bethel, a teenage runaway who lived in parks. Reading and writing was her escape. She went on to get a law degree with the help of a mentor. Or Greg Reid, who turned away from drugs and alcohol through a rehab program to run a successful advertising business and write best-selling inspirational books. Thank you, Union-Tribune for showing there are truly beautiful people in the world.”*

Second place: “The community college bot crisis”

Jakob McWhinney (Voice of San Diego)

Third place: “Selling humans-examples of this year’s coverage starting with the PIMP CIRCUIT, the mayor exaggerated claim debunked and efforts to protect minors from trafficking”

JW August (Times of San Diego)

Overall comment: *“The range of series from homeless and education to sex trafficking and immigration made this an excellent category.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Sports Story

First place: “San Diego American Legion team broke color barrier; made history 85 years ago”
Bill Swank (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“I’m a sucker for this kind of story. Not only did the San Diego American Legion team break the color barrier 5 years ago, they had to fight officials who wouldn’t let their black players play in the championship.”*

Second place: “Soccer as sanctuary: How the beautiful game saved Christina Burkenroad”
Cesar Hernandez (ESPN)

Third place: “San Diego resident golfers teed off at their vanishing access to city-run courses”
JW August (KPBS)

Overall comment: *“Strong competition among publications that understand it is people who make sports popular, not just scores or results.”*

Daily Reporting and Writing — Travel Story

First place: “Ahoy! Two cruise-ship virgins do Viking’s three-river Grand European Tour”
George Varga and Beth Wood (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“Good primer for those who never considered taking a cruise.”*

Second place: “San Diego airport’s \$4 billion gamble was a new terminal”
Lori Weisberg (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Third place: “Our guide to San Diego’s desert destinations”
Karen Pearlman and Miriam Raftery (East County Magazine)

Overall comment: *“There’s all different views of travel in San Diego.”*

Design Elements — Feature Photo

First place: “One kite chaser actually goes airborne in his quest for the tail.”
Criselda Yee (Point Loma-OB Monthly)

Judge’s comment: *“This photo brings home the action and excitement for the children. Capturing a happy moment in time.”*

Second place: “Poway’s Christmas in the Park kicks off the holidays”
Criselda Yee (Poway News Chieftain)

Judge’s comment: *“Nice photo but I would have cropped the photo to focus on the awe shown by the boy to the left of the tree.”*

Design Elements — Headline

First place: “Eyes in the sky: Drones provide a new view of conservation” and other headlines
Peggy Scott (San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance Journal)

Judge’s comment: *“All three headline examples showcase the cleverness and editorial skills of the production desk. Very clean headlines with great design.”*

Design Elements — Layout and Page Design

First place: “Healthier Hanukkah”

Kenneth Pagano (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“Clever design elements that to the normal reader will be a nice revelation. A clean jump page organizes recipes in a way that doesn't cause a reader ‘agita.’ Great work!”*

Second place: “Hike. Eat. See: Oahu”

Kenneth Pagano (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“A clean and eclectic view of Oahu and the sights to see. Organization of design visuals are well made.”*

Third place: “A jewel in the crown”

Kenneth Pagano (The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Judge’s comment: *“Great way to incorporate the headline into a photo while still being readable and interesting. Very well made!”*

Design Elements — Photo Essay

First place: “How the tiniest domestic violence survivors heal with the help of a San Diego preschool”

Adriana Heldiz (CalMatters)

Judge’s comment: *“This entry was just so compelling and touching, seeing the children’s scared and worried expressions in the beginning to their joy at their preschool graduation months later. I did not know such a preschool program existed to help the littlest domestic violence victims. The fact that it took seven months to create this piece speaks volumes on how dedicated this journalist was to do the story right. Wonderful job! Kudos too to the media outlet for allowing the journalist to spend numerous hours and months to create one piece.”*

Digital — Blog

First place: “News Updates for News Avoiders”

Ashlyn Raine Lipori-Russie (Ask Ashlyn)

Judge’s comment: *“In an era when it takes all methods to reach people with legitimate news, this is a novel idea. The news can be overwhelming and that's also when it's important to consume. Ask Ashlyn also has the news background to provide it.”*

Digital — Entertainment Site

First place: “KPBS Arts & Culture”

Julia Dixon Evans, Beth Accomando, Anthony Wallace, Audy McAfee and Chrissy Nguyen (KPBS)

Judge’s comment: *“Website is very well organized with clean paths to content. While the main page has plenty of entry points, the layout is subtle and not a sledgehammer trying to open everything at once. Too much websites are cluttered. This one is complete with some space to breathe.”*

Digital — Multimedia Presentation

First place: “HOME SICK: Chronic illness and longing define life in the Tijuana River valley”
inewssource staff (inewssource)

Judge's comment: *"The depth of this story is matched only by the immersive presentation in a brilliant combination of words, images, maps, visuals, illustrations and photos. It is apparent the effort and time that went into this project and presentation. Incredibly well done."*

Second place: "Fall of Sàigòn at 50: Stories of loss, legacy and identity"

Alexander Nguyen, Elaine Alfaro, Lara McCaffrey and McCoy Knapp (KPBS)

Judge's comment: *"It took a long time to judge this contest because both entries deserve a first-place award. The videos and stories are powerful and thought-provoking and also a reminder of how much harm and destruction can be caused by U.S. intervention and subterfuge. I was reminded of the late Anthony Bourdain's quote: 'Once you've been to Cambodia, you'll never stop wanting to beat Henry Kissinger to death with your bare hands.'"*

Overall comment: *"Note to San Diego, both are worthy of co-first place awards. I had to choose one and the multimedia aspect of Home Sick pushed it ahead. But both are so powerful and well-done."*

Digital — News Site

First place: "Daylight San Diego"

Daylight San Diego staff (Daylight San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"Content is very well-organized and the main page allows multiple entry points without becoming a sea of click points. The imagery and photos are excellent and the information for the community and coverage is excellent. The best part of this website is that it doesn't assault the viewer with pop-up ads and auto-play videos. Too many news websites are sensory overload now, not to mention the overflow of ads that look like the offspring of tabloids."*

Digital — Social Media Account

First place: "Voice of San Diego Instagram"

Bella Ross (Voice of San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"Excellent use of social media to provide information to the community on both serious and lighter topics. Very engaging."*

Digital — Social Media Storytelling

First place: "San Diego's complex issues, explained"

Iran Martinez Jr. and Crystal Niebla (inewssource)

Second place: "Sea level rise threatens Sunset Cliffs (and its parking)"

Bella Ross and MacKenzie Elmer (Voice of San Diego)

Third place: "Daylight San Diego on Instagram"

Daylight San Diego (Daylight San Diego)

Overall comment: *"All of the entries were informative and provided great community information. Social media has to hold attention and that is done with narrative, images and personality. It is especially effective when explaining new laws or complex issues."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Arts/Entertainment Story (Performing Arts)

First place: "'Madness takes its toll:' Crazed Imaginations celebrates 50 years of 'Rocky Horror'"

Lauren J. Mapp (Daylight San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"It's very hard to write anything new about a very old cult classic, but Lauren Mapp managed to do so in a very entertaining read."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Arts/Entertainment Story (Visual Arts)

First place: "A mark of development"

Mateo Hoke (San Diego Magazine)

Judge's comment: *"All of the entries presented fascinating features on the subject. This one stood out in how it linked the past with the present and reminded readers of a talented creator with a foothold in history or perhaps introduced them to an acclaimed artist they needed to know."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Breaking News Story

First place: "County supervisors force top lawyer to retire"

Arturo Castanares (La Prensa San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"Arturo Castanares did an excellent job of unraveling the details of backdoor deals - always a tough task - and shed public light on officials attempting to dictate twist political patronage into every direction for both personal and professional favor."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Business Story

First place: "NONPROFIT VOICES: This Barrio Logan vo-tech school teaches civilian work skills to vets"

Ron Donoho (The San Diego Sun)

Judge's comment: *"The story is enhanced by multiple stories of veterans who have been helped. It is important to remind readers of the good that can be done by people who care."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Column

First place: "A View from the Chair"

Lisa Ross (High Sierran)

Judge's comment: *"All national issues also are local, and the author has done an excellent job of tracking progress, setbacks and shenanigans involving environmental protection. Very valuable and timely information for readers."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Criminal Justice Story

First place: "San Diego advocates push to end girls' incarceration"

Lauren J. Mapp (Daylight San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"Thorough story about a proposed policy change that was boosted by facts, first-person perspectives and why it was needed."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Education Story

First place: "CSU San Marcos to open new Native student center this fall"

Lauren J. Mapp (Daylight San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"This was a tough category to judge with multiple entries and all excellent stories. The winner elevated with the depth of coverage and connection with the students."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Environment Story

First place: "Local brewery is first to be triple-certified in sustainable accreditations"

Elena Gomez (HomeTold with Elena)

Judge's comment: *"Big changes happen at the local level. This story explained what and how a local brewery made a difference. Imagine if others followed suit."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Feature Story (Light Subject)

First place: "House music"

Mateo Hoke (San Diego Magazine)

Judge's comment: *"Fascinating story on an unusual house and engineering feat that shares its history, former residents and the current owner. Very well done, and the photos made it even better."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Feature Story (Serious Subject)

First place: "The murder, the museum and the monument"

Kori Suzuki (High Country News)

Judge's comment: *"The author expertly shifted the story between past and present and explained the horror of what had happened and the efforts of reconciling what had happened and what should have been done. Very well done."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Food Story

First place: "Fish farm to table"

Mateo Hoke (San Diego Magazine)

Judge's comment: *"The writer provided a thorough story about how bluefin tuna reaches plates around the world and addressed all issues from taste to farming vs. wild to moral implications. Interesting read."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Government Story

First place: "Local nonprofits unite amid Trump-era funding cuts"

Lauren J. Mapp (Daylight San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"At a time of unprecedented budget cuts, nonprofits and organizations have to work together to get services to people who need them. Well-written story about these efforts."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Health Story

First place: "La Jolla blazes own path in fight to prevent blindness from rare illness"

Noah Lyons (La Jolla Light)

Judge's comment: *"All three entries were compelling stories. The story of siblings trying to find a cure elevated itself with writing and reporting."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Housing/Development Story

First place: “Can Grant Oliphant transform Downtown San Diego into a ‘Cathedral?’”
Ron Donoho (The San Diego Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“A quest to revitalize downtown in any city is a big undertaking. Nice work of getting an insightful interview with the man who intends to lead it.”*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Housing Insecurity Story

First place: “‘Seniors Safe At Home’ homeless prevention program gets funding boost”
Ron Donoho (The San Diego Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“Stories like this are always better when a human face and predicament are the focus. Good work.”*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Investigative/Enterprise Story

First place: “Blighted Fault Line Park in East Village remains a monument to bad management”
Joshua Silla and Madison Geering (The San Diego Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“Very thorough and well-researched story about a city park in need of clear oversight and responsibility for security and upkeep. It also outlined the byzantine process to get anything fixed.”*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Multicultural Story

First place: “Native Star Boutique reclaims ancestral grounds in San Diego”
Jeanne Ferris (News from Native California)

Judge’s comment: *“Excellent story that combines detailed history, cultural significance, the reclaiming of ancestral grounds and the reestablishment of community. Very well done, a powerful read.”*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — News Story

First place: “Laura Fink: Why she’s not mourning the death of Bob Filner”
Ron Donoho (The San Diego Sun)

Judge’s comment: *“The expression don’t speak ill of the dead should not apply to those who caused others so much pain while alive. I applaud Laura Fink for her honesty and the writer for giving her the platform to use her voice. Well-written and timely story about how powerful men have abused women.”*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Opinion/Editorial

First place: “PERSPECTIVE: Supervisors to appoint treasurer amid talk of backroom deal”
Arturo Castanares (La Prensa San Diego)

Judge’s comment: *“This is a fundamental task of journalism - bring to light what public and elected officials attempt to do in the dark.”*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Politics

First place: “San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria not following his own parking laws”
Ron Donoho (The San Diego Sun)

Judge's comment: *"Rules are rules, even for a mayor with an exempt plate. Good work."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Profile

First place: "Observing Jane Goodall"
Lynne Friedmann (Culture Vulture)

Judge's comment: *"When someone of such significance dies, it is the stories that either haven't been told or are not widely known that resonate so much. This story captured the essence of Jane Goodall."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Review/Criticism

First place: "Noises Off"
Lynne Friedmann (Culture Vulture)

Judge's comment: *"A review, whether good or bad, is rarely as entertaining as the actual performance. This one was with superb descriptions of the chaos unfolding and a writing style that is splendidly engaging."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Science/Technology Story

First place: "Touching the future"
Mateo Hoke (San Diego Magazine)

Judge's comment: *"Excellent coverage of the progress made in prosthetics that was made even more powerful by the stories of who it had helped and how."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Series

First place: "Poway Councilmember Blain resigns a day after voters show support for his recall"
Julie Gallant, Susan Gill Vardon and Elizabeth Marie Himchak (Poway News Chieftain)

Judge's comment: *"The light of reporting will always expose the wrongdoers, especially with elected officials. The reporters also did a good job of presenting both sides, even if one side buried himself even further with his remarks. Excellent reminder of what journalism can do. If I could have done co-first place winners, I would have also bestowed it on 'Nonprofit Voices.' There were excellent stories that showed if see an issue, do something about it. Lives have been changed by these efforts."*

Second place: "Nonprofit Voices"
Ron Donoho (The San Diego Sun)

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Sports Story

First place: "Poway teacher gearing up to run 7 marathons in 7 days on 7 continents"
Elizabeth Marie Himchak (Poway News Chieftain)

Judge's comment: *"The story of seven marathons in seven days was so compellingly written that I checked to see if she raised the funds and made it. Very well-written account that revealed the why of a runner and what it meant to her."*

Nondaily Reporting and Writing — Travel

First place: "Once upon a time in Sweden"

Nathalie Taylor (Village News)

Judge's comment: *"The writer painted a visual story that made me feel as if I were on the trip. Very well done and enjoyable to read."*

Spanish Media — Print (Feature Story)

First place: "Borderlands alive honoring the dead"

Alfonso Julián Camacho (The Southwestern College Sun)

Judge's comment: *"The placed choice is in a style of feature that I am used to. Nicely done with nice visuals, it shows quality of storytelling without overwhelming the reader."*

Video — Business/Consumer Report

First place: "Receipt paper sparks wave of lawsuit threats"

Austin Grabish and Amol Brown (KGTV 10News ABC San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"Great job explaining the technical aspect of why this chemical is dangerous."*

Video — Community Services Program or Series

First place: "Marie Widman: A legacy worth preserving"

Enedina Cisneros, Wale Aliyu and Jimmy Dedios (KGTV 10News ABC San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"A touching tribute to a city leader. Wale's reporting brings this piece of history to life for the viewers. Well-done."*

Second place: "Volunteer-run mobile library helps kids discover love for reading in communities south of the border."

Matthew Bowler (KPBS)

Judge's comment: *"Such an interesting topic that would not normally get much media attention. Great job showing the human side of those this program helps."*

Video — Government Story

First place: "What's in — and what's missing from — San Diego's new 'Street Design Manual'"

Andrew Bowen, Carlos Castillo and Matthew Bowler (KPBS)

Second place: "Mother of teen furious no charges filed after daughter exploited on military base"

Austin Grabish and Amol Brown (KGTV 10News ABC San Diego)

Third place: "Votes are being counted following a historic election day in Mexico"

Matthew Bowler (KPBS)

Overall comment: *"The roadway policy story was the most direct link between what government does and how it affects people. The issue of underage women being pimped out for service found me wondering what the heck is the military doing to stop this. And finally, the election of judges, again a good story, is just a public interest story more than a direct government feeling story."*

Video — Investigative/Enterprise Series

First place: "License to abuse: Doctors, sexual misconduct and a broken law"

Austin Grabish and Amol Brown (KGTV 10News ABC San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"The trust between a doctor and a patient is paramount. Great job exposing this shocking loophole, and because of your work, more patients may be protected. Long video pieces, but they keep moving because of the great use of sound and graphics with the paperwork."*

Video — Investigative/Enterprise Story

First place: "Hidden cameras, hidden secrets: The SDPD scandal"

Austin Grabish and Amol Brown (KGTV 10News ABC San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"Wowzers. What a scandal. Great job staying fair and balanced while covering such a disturbing story."*

Video — News Feature (Light News Reporting)

First place: "Schools, families, Y La Música Que Los Une"

Enedina Cisneros, Lindsey Peña and Maria-Camila Murica (KGTV 10News ABC San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"The last note of this video piece brought a tear to my eye. The way the contestants wove together history with the present day made for a very engaging piece. This 'light news' story perfectly captured a very empowering theme: connection."*

Video — News Feature (Serious News Reporting)

First place: "A ball with wings"

Eric Kahnert (CBS8)

Second place: "HOME SICK: Rancher shares how pollution in Tijuana River changed his life"

Philip Salata and Iran Martinez Jr. (inewsourc)

Third place: "Life on hold: Brain surgery patient caught in insurance dispute"

Austin Grabish, Amol Brown and Gerald Labrador (KGTV 10News ABC San Diego)

Overall comment: *"The three choices have one thing in common - they are all stories that allow the viewer to participate in the feeling of the story in a way where it feels reaffirming. Whether it's because of the media getting involved, or just the fact that we are getting to be told of something that is happening, the lens does not warp in any of these stories to any one angle, but to just tell the story, the feelings come naturally with them."*

Video — Politics

First place: "North County market owner gets temporary reprieve in immigration court"

Alexander Nguyen and Matthew Bowler (KPBS)

Judge's comment: *"The first-place winner shows what a policy that is done by fiat at the White House looks like at the human level."*

Video — Sports Story

First place: "Rain doesn't dampen pickleball nationals' San Diego debut"

Alexander Nguyen and Mike Damron (KPBS)

Judge's comment: *"Well shot, well edited. Great package, personalizing a new sport. The piece stays engaging all the way to the end, with great characters and sound bites."*

Video — Video Editing

First place: PLNU International Student Documentary

Grace Chaves, Jonathan Raditsas, Garrison Tso and Aubrey Bechard (YouTube)

Judge's comment: *"As a professional who has lived overseas and also has worked in International Studies, I find this piece to be very relatable to those who are in this special cohort of students for any school. The tussle of being so far away but also achieving your dreams is touch for international students, which this piece highlights not through some directed narrative by a narrator, but by the students itself. Nicely done."*

Special Awards — Diversity Award

The Southwestern College Sun

The Sun Staff

Judge's comment: *"Every entry for this award deserved consideration, and all were outstanding. The depth and breadth of coverage by the Sun staff elevated this entry to the top."*

Special Awards — Sol Price Award for Responsible Journalism

"How vermin make life – and business – miserable for Coronado restaurateurs"

Julieta Soto (The Coronado News)

Judge's comment: *"Publishing a story about vermin in eating establishments certainly fits the criteria for 'unpopularity' and 'economic retribution.' The photos were disgusting (in a good way). The writer presented a thorough report and provided opportunities for everyone to respond. The reporting forced some compliance action to be taken, which was also noted in the story. Food safety is a significant issue. Very well done."*

Special Awards — Neil Morgan Community Impact Award

"Flaws in the San Diego Police Department Portal"

JW August (Times of San Diego)

Judge's comment: *"This story showed the importance of tracking a story and following up. While initial inquiries brought no changes from within, the report by a new member of the commission did and led to much-needed changes of an archaic system. The other entries also were outstanding. While the last thing any chapter may want is another category, perhaps the community award could be two categories - government and feature. The soccer series also was deserving."*

Special Awards — Gloria Penner Award for Political Affairs Reporting

"Investigating organized labor in San Diego County"

Cody Dulaney and Greg Moran (inewssource)

Judge's comment: *"This unraveled a byzantine tangle of politics, development, labor and housing. The proverbial good guy of the story never emerged. The losers are the residents caught in this web. Wages for all workers does need to be addressed, especially in a city with such a high cost of living, but entangling low-income housing isn't the way to go. Again, no one looks good in this story and some level of compromise and oversight needs to be done."*

Special Awards — First Amendment Award

“City of San Diego paid law firm \$37K to probe allegations made against police chief”
Austin Grabish (KGTV 10News ABC San Diego)

Judge’s comment: *“The reporter’s persistence is to be applauded, especially by finding additional ways to pursue the story. The lack of transparency is a bigger issue, such as the report not being subject to open records law. When it involves a city’s top cop, it should be a given.”*

Special Awards — James Julian Memorial Award - Community Service Story

“Community loves like Jesus”
Denis Grasska (The Southern Cross)

Judge’s comment: *“It is grassroots efforts like this that can make so much difference in a community. The writer did an excellent job of conveying that difference and getting the perspective of both volunteers and beneficiaries.”*

Special Awards — Herbert Lockwood "Woody" Award - Humor Writing

“The changing shape of San Diego’s Zonie-Hate”
Jakob McWhinney (Voice of San Diego)

Judge’s comment: *“Funny a side of edge newsworthiness, as well as a story as old as time.”*

Top Awards — Distinguished Coverage Award

Topic: ICE – Immigration, enforcement and deportations

“How volunteer patrols are working to protect San Diego immigrant communities from ICE”
Roberto Camacho (Bolts)

Judge’s comment: *“Excellent work on the ground to provide coverage of a situation that has been harrowing for observers, protestors and media members. It is also a reminder that the best response comes from within the community and it is the role of the media to be there and document what happens not just for news now but for posterity.”*

Top Awards — SPJ Excellence in Journalism Award

“HOME SICK: Chronic illness and longing define life in the Tijuana River valley”
inewsourc staff

Judge’s comment: *“This was an incredibly well-done package and hands down the best entry among all 2025 submissions. Excellence, indeed.”*