



JOHN LOCHER Associated Press

CHIEFS REPEAT AS CHAMPS

Kansas City quarterback Patrick Mahomes, who threw for 333 yards in capturing his third Super Bowl MVP, celebrates with teammates after the Chiefs defeated the San Francisco 49ers 25-22 in overtime on Sunday in Las Vegas. **SPORTS, D1**

Glitches plague college aid form

A chaotic rollout of a new federal application is upending admissions.

By Howard Blume and Teresa Watanabe

Esmeralda Bernal is the valedictorian of Downtown Magnets High School this year, the daughter of Mexican immigrants who never went to college. She's taken 18 college-level classes and aced them with a cumulative 4.5 GPA while taking on leadership roles in her school's robotics and math clubs. She dreams of becoming a civil engineer.

Yet the brainy senior couldn't get past glitches to submit her federal financial aid form for more than a month. A new form designed to be simpler was just the opposite for her: impenetrable.

She had been trying to reach the U.S. Department of Education's help line since early January, to no avail. Finally, after calling 13 times one day last week, she got someone on the line who could help. She submitted her form and is anxiously waiting for the federal information to be sent to colleges, which use the all-important Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, to craft aid packages that let students know whether they can afford their dream schools. For Esmeralda, they're MIT, Smith College and UC Berkeley.

"It was really frustrating," Esmeralda said. "It didn't feel simpler to me."

As tens of thousands of California students struggle through one of the most stressful times of their high school journeys — the wait for college acceptance letters — their anxiety has been compounded this year by a chaotic and glitch-filled roll-

[See FAFSA, A6]

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Recordings reflect Girardi's decline — or perhaps a ploy

Ex-lawyer left dozens of confused voicemails over Times reports on his legal issues. Was it dementia, or an effort to avoid trial?

By Matt Hamilton

On New Year's Eve in 2020, Tom Girardi called me from his cellphone. In a brief voicemail left in The Times' general mailbox, the once-fearsome attorney said there were "slandorous statements" in an article I had co-written.

A lawsuit, he said, was coming soon.

At another moment, a voicemail like that from Girardi might have elicited caution, even alarm.

After all, for much of his career, Girardi was a formidable lawyer whose calling card was the "Erin Brockovich" case. He had won millions for scores of clients, and was on



LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

TOM GIRARDI, in court last year, is charged with embezzling millions from his legal clients.

a first-name basis with judges, governors, senators. He was the type of opponent who knew his way around the corridors of power and how to leverage that for maximum gain.

But all of that had changed a few weeks before.

A federal judge in Chicago had determined that Girardi misappropriated more than \$2 million from clients — widows and orphans whose loved ones died in a Boeing plane crash in Indonesia. Boeing had wired the money to Girardi's firm, yet it never reached his clients.

Appearing by phone in that hearing [See Girardi, A10]

U.K. PUBS IN A BIT OF A PICKLE

Long important community fixtures, classic taverns are finding it difficult to stay afloat amid shifting work and leisure patterns

By Charlotte Lytton

LONDON — Over the bar of a 200-year-old pub in southeast London hangs a sign: "For the people of East Greenwich, by the people of East Greenwich."

What might sound like a pithy slogan is, in fact, the truth. The Star of Greenwich, which almost closed for good last year, has been saved by the local community after three residents — all of whom hold down full-time jobs — came to the rescue of their "local."

"Once these things go, they never come back," said James Gadsby Peet, who banded together with two friends to take over running the pub. It's not the drinks that matter here, he said, but preserving "a community space for people to come together."

[See Pubs, A4]



JOSHUA BRIGHT For The Times

LISA DONOHOE, left, Kirsty Dunlop and James Gadsby Peet teamed up to save their community's 200-year-old pub, the Star of Greenwich in southeast London.

Reversal in state's war on plastic bag use

Ten years after the passage of landmark legislation, the tonnage of such waste has skyrocketed.

By Susanne Rust

It was a decade ago when California became the first state in the nation to ban single-use plastic bags, ushering in a wave of anti-plastic legislation from coast to coast.

But in the years after California seemingly kicked its plastic grocery sack habit, material recovery facilities and environmental activists noticed a peculiar trend: Plastic bag waste by weight was increasing to unprecedented levels.

According to a report by the consumer advocacy group CALPIRG, 157,385 tons of plastic bag waste was discarded in California the year the law was passed. By 2022, however, the tonnage of discarded plastic bags had skyrocketed to 231,072 — a 47% jump. Even accounting for an increase in population, the number rose from 4.08 tons per 1,000 people in 2014 to 5.89 tons per 1,000 people in 2022.

The problem, it turns out, was a section of the law that allowed grocery stores and large retailers to provide thicker, heavier-weight plastic bags to customers for the price of a dime.

"It was a conscious decision to create a pathway for a type of reusable bag that barely existed," said Mark Murray, director of Californians Against Waste, an environmental organization. "It was just emerging in the marketplace, but it happened to be made by a couple of California companies ... which the manufacturers claimed they could certify as being reusable."

He said the bags were made of 20% recyclable material and the manufacturers said they could be recycled at the end of their "useful life. ... So we said, all right, fine. We're gonna put that specific criteria into the law."

[See Plastic, A6]

NATO leader's Trump warning

Head of the military alliance says ex-president's comments put U.S. troops and allies at risk. **WORLD, A3**

Paying for state climate solutions

California is looking to raise electric bills for the wealthy — and perhaps middle-class families. **BUSINESS, A7**

Help for those facing eviction

Outreach workers in L.A. want tenants to know what their options are before it's too late. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Weather

Lots of sunshine. L.A. Basin: 67/43. **B6**

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