



Photographs by GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

A USC GRADUATE walks with her gown in Alumni Park on her way to be photographed. The marquee “main stage” commencement ceremony traditionally held there has been called off amid recent protests.

THE UNFOLDING OF A ‘COMPLETE DISASTER’

USC’s nixing of the valedictorian’s speech led to nearly two weeks of turmoil, with arrests and a canceled commencement

By JAWEED KALEEM, ANGIE ORELLANA HERNANDEZ AND MATT HAMILTON

The crowning of Asna Tabassum as USC valedictorian was supposed to be a time of pride for a university that has tried to shed its old image as a playground for the privileged by bolstering academics and diversity.

In selecting Tabassum from close to 100 applicants with near-perfect GPAs and impressive extracurriculars, USC put the spotlight on a hijab-wearing Muslim daughter of Indian immigrants for its highest undergraduate honor.

A biomedical engineering major with a passion for social justice who minored in “resistance to genocide,” she was just the kind of student USC has aimed to attract and has celebrated in ads for the university, where the annual tab for those without scholarships or financial aid this fall will eclipse \$95,000.

Instead, the decision by President Carol Folt to rescind Tabassum’s graduation speaking slot after undisclosed threats has catapulted USC into almost two weeks of [See ‘Disaster,’ A7]



USC STUDENTS demonstrating against the war in Gaza are seen Saturday at an encampment at Founders Park on campus.

NIGHT AND DAY: At USC, police arrested 93 protesters. At UCLA, observers kept a distance. CALIFORNIA, B1

COLUMN ONE

After mother’s killing, Israeli chooses peace

The son, who grew up in one of the kibbutzim attacked by Hamas, finds a source of light in Hebrew-Arabic school his children attend



MARCUS YAM Los Angeles Times

THROUGH his children, Carmel Neta has acquired a gentler Arabic vocabulary than what he learned while in the army.

By KATE LINTHICUM
REPORTING FROM HAIFA, ISRAEL

Carmel Neta was on the phone with his mother, Adrienne, when Hamas militants stormed her kibbutz on the morning of Oct. 7. He could hear panic in her voice and screams in the distance.

Neta, 39, did his best to calm her, urging her to take refuge in a safe room and then guiding her in a meditation. Two of his siblings were also on the call, and promised their mom that when the attack was over, they would all travel together to Paris.

They were still on the line as the assailants burst into Adrienne’s home. They heard her plead with the intruders in Arabic, which she had picked up while working as a midwife for Palestinian and Bedouin families in southern Israel. Then the call cut out.

Adrienne, 66, died in the massacre at [See Mideast, A4]

Official accused of water theft is ‘Robin Hood’ to some farmers

Federal case against the leader of Panoche district alleges one of most audacious heists in modern history.

By JESSICA GARRISON

LOS BANOS, Calif. — Robert Zavala was fresh out of the Marines and looking to escape dead-end work at a poultry plant in the early 1990s when his old baseball coach — now the head of a local water district — swooped to the rescue with a job offer.

Zavala was grateful for the job, which eventually paid more than \$150,000 a year and included perks such as free housing and a new truck. Grateful enough, he later testified in state court, that when he learned the public agency he worked for was stealing water from the federal government he kept his mouth shut. For years.

And then one day in 2016, FBI agents showed up at his house.

“They told me they were

investigating my boss for water theft, and they wanted to know if I wanted to go to federal prison with him,” Zavala said in his testimony.

Zavala became one of many employees the FBI would interview about goings-on in the Panoche Water District, a public agency formed in 1951 that supplies irrigation for 38,000 acres of farmland in Fresno and Merced counties on the parched western side of the San Joaquin Valley.

The stories were “unimaginable,” one Panoche official later testified in the same civil case. Public funds were allegedly used to pay for housing and pickup trucks for employees, along with slot machines, illicit home remodels, tickets to Katy Perry concerts, even an employee’s court-ordered restitution for an assault charge, according to testimony in the civil case, court filings in a state criminal case and a related state audit.

Not to mention the alleged theft of 130,000 acre-feet of water — enough to supply a small city for sev- [See Water, A10]

From trust fund kid to media mogul

The evolution of tech scion David Ellison continues with his bid to acquire Paramount.

By STACY PERMAN

When David Ellison, the mega-rich aerobatic pilot and Ferrari-driving son of multibillionaire Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison landed in Hollywood, he was viewed as yet another trust fund scion with klieg lights in his eyes and an enviable bank account.

Unlike most Hollywood neophytes of his ilk, however, Ellison did not flame out in ignominy or retreat much poorer for his efforts. Rather, Ellison (after a few hiccups) launched Skydance Media, a successful Santa Monica production company that has bankrolled a slew of massive box office and television hits such as “Top Gun: Maverick,” “Star Trek” and “Grace and Frankie,” and more recently, expanded into animation, sports and gaming. Two years ago, the company

secured \$400 million in funding, giving Skydance a valuation at more than \$4 billion, and it now has 1,300 employees.

Today, Ellison’s Skydance Media is a strong contender to acquire Paramount Global in a deal that would give the 41-year-old control of the storied movie studio behind “The Godfather” and “Chinatown,” as well as a sprawling portfolio of assets including CBS Entertainment, the BET, MTV and Nickelodeon cable channels and a national movie theater chain — recasting Ellison from megarich Hollywood financier to even richer media mogul.

The proposed deal — it would see Skydance acquire National Amusements (the company that owns nearly 80% of Paramount Global’s voting shares) for \$2 billion in cash, followed by Paramount Global buying Skydance in an all-stock deal worth \$5 billion — has been backed by Shari Redstone, Paramount’s powerful non-executive chairwoman, but it is far from assured.

Shareholders have [See Ellison, A13]

On aisle 3, deodorant gets locked up

Security glass once protected the priciest items, but stores are widening theft deterrence. BUSINESS, A12

Trump’s legal week recapped

Action began with hush money trial and included cases in 4 states and D.C. NATION, A6

Weather

Mostly sunny.
L.A. Basin: 74/56. B10

What \$150,000 buys you in state

Believe it or not, homes remain affordable in these far-flung towns. CALIFORNIA, B1

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