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The Fresno Bee



Reedley was third stop in state for lab found with COVID inside

BY TIM SHEEHAN
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Nina Salazar was happy to have a job when she worked for three years at a Chinese-owned laboratory in Tulare that made disease and drug test kits – the same lab that was shut down in Reedley after Covid-19 and more than 20 infectious agents were found in refrigerators in the ramshackle facility that was operating without proper permits.

Salazar, who lives in Visalia, told The Fresno Bee that she was a lab tech for Universal Meditech Inc. at its location at 2375 E. Tulare Ave. from 2015 into 2018. During that time, she and about 15 other employees assembled pregnancy, diabetes and drug test kits, she said.

“I was so excited because I had a job,” she said. “It felt important because we got to wear lab coats and stuff.”

But there was something that seemed “odd and shady” about the place, too, she said. There

were occasional problems with paychecks, “and when (managers) would come to do visits for investors, they would have to get people from outside to come in and work on the production line” to make the laboratory seem more economically viable, she said.

Then there were the chemicals that Salazar and co-workers handled but were never identified to them. “We had to make this purple liquid for tests; we had to mix the chemicals; we had to cook it,” she said. “They



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Fresno County Assistant Director of Public Health Joe Prado, right, projects images of refrigerators, freezers and various liquids found in a Reedley warehouse run by a Chinese-owned company under investigation for operating illegally, during a timeline presentation at the Fresno County Board of Supervisor's meeting on Tuesday.

only told us that it had to be a special fluid, perfectly made for the test strips.”

“But they never told us what the chemicals were,” She said. “They spoke Chinese a lot, so

we didn't know what they were saying.” She said not knowing what the chemicals were was concerning.

SEE REEDLEY, 4A



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Members of the Mendota Junior High School Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement team (MESA) are photographed with their teacher and advisor, Carlos Tamayo, and members of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors during their meeting on Tuesday while accepting a proclamation acknowledging the team for placing first overall in the 2023 MESA USA National Engineering Design Competition in New Mexico in June. The team created an app called “FentaKNOW,” which connects their community with resources to combat the fentanyl crisis. In front from left are Jonathan Alfaro, Gerardo Portillo, teacher Carlos Tamayo, Anthony Trinidad and Jimmy Fuentes.

Fresno students win national award for app they developed

BY LAURA S. DIAZ
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Four Mendota eighth graders knew fentanyl was a problem in Fresno County and wanted to do something about it.

So Gerardo Portillo, Anthony Trinidad, Jonathan Alfaro and Jimmy Fuentes developed an app that provides information in Spanish and English about the dangers of fentanyl, signs and symptoms of an overdose, and local resources. It even includes a 911 call button.

The boys created the app, called FentaKNOW, for their Math Engineering, Science and Achievement (MESA) project. The app also was the students' entry to the MESA USA National Engineering Design Competition, where they won first place overall and beat 25,000 other students on June 30.

“We saw a lot of casualties, deaths, that have happened in our community due to fentanyl,” Portillo said. “So we decided to research it and do our MESA project on the topic.”

Fentanyl was present in 25% of single-drug overdose deaths and was 45% of combined drug overdose deaths in Fresno County, according to the Fresno County Sheriff's Office Coroner's annual 2021 report. Fentanyl overdose deaths have also exponentially increased from four in 2017 to 71 in 2021.

During their meeting this week, the Fresno County Board of Supervisors recognized Portillo, Trinidad, Alfaro and Fuentes for their success and contributions to the community.

“Gentlemen, you are supported far and wide,” said Supervisor Brian Pacheco. “As the representative of western Fresno County, I myself cannot

be more proud to represent you and congratulate you for all that you have done.”

Supervisor Sal Quintero said the students have a bright future.

“If there are any recruiters out there to offer scholarships,” Quintero said, “you are getting the best of the best.”

The boys and their advisor, Carlos Tamayo, received a proclamation and individual diplomas from the county and took a group photo with the supervisors.

As soon as they were done, the boys – from Mexican and Salvadoran families – received a round of applause from a packed boardroom. On the way out, they were cheered in Spanish and English by other community members. They couldn't stop looking at their awards in awe once they left the Fresno County Hall of Records and gathered at Court-

house Park.

“It feels good knowing that we did something for our community,” Trinidad said, “and helping out the local towns near our city.”

Portillo agreed.

“It makes us feel proud of our hard work and where we came from,” he said.

MENDOTA STUDENTS' APP FIGHTS FENTANYL CRISIS

Alfaro explained they developed the app with JavaScript coding through Code.org's online app development platform. Code.org is a nonprofit organization focused on innovation and dedicated to providing K-12 students with computer science learning opportunities.

After winning the regional competition in Oakland and state in San Diego, the students

SEE STUDENTS, 4A

Father of infant killed in Goshen sues Tulare County

BY THADDEUS MILLER
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The father of the 10-month-old killed in a massacre in central California that left six executed has filed a lawsuit against Tulare County officials and law enforcement accusing them of failing to remove the child from an unfit home.

Nicholas was shot in the head as he was held by his 16-year-old mother, Alissa Parraz, who was attempting to flee the Jan. 16 massacre before being shot herself multiple times in Goshen, a community west of Visalia, the Tulare County Sheriff's Office has said.

The father of the baby and fiancé to Parraz, Shayne Maupin, filed the lawsuit Aug. 4, according to court records.

The lawsuit claims child welfare service workers and personnel from the Tulare County Sheriff's Office failed to remove the infant from the home despite gang members living there and the discovery of weapons and methamphetamine.

It names seven deputies and four child welfare service workers.

Tulare County workers and deputies could have prevented the death of the child, according to Wyatt Vespermann, an attorney representing Maupin.

“The number of red flags and missed opportunities by both Tulare County Child Welfare Services and the sheriff's office are too many to count,” Vespermann said in a news release.

“What happened to this young family is simply unacceptable.”

The damages should be determined by a jury trial, the complaint says. The next hearing is Dec. 6.

The Tulare County Sheriff's Office and Tulare County Counsel did not return requests for a comment.

CHILD WELFARE SERVICES AND GOSHEN FAMILY

Tulare County officials have noted the 10-month-old had

SEE LAWSUIT, 4A



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