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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce Announces Award Honorees for 100th Annual Awards Luncheon Presented by Mechanics Bank

DATE/TIME: Thursday, February 25, 2021 from 11:30am-1pm
LOCATION: Virtual Event to be held via Zoom
TICKETS: \$20/ person (available via Chamber Website)

The Salinas Valley Chamber has announced the recipients of its Annual Awards Luncheon which will take place on Thursday, February 25 from 11:30am-1pm via Zoom. With attendance in normal years of over 500, the Annual Awards Luncheon is the single largest gathering of businesspeople in our area. This year, the event will be held virtually and will continue to bring together the local community to toast our valued honorees. This year marks the 100th Annual Awards Luncheon, and is once again presented by Mechanics Bank.

The Chamber will honor the following businesses and individuals for their accomplishments:

Small Business of the Year: Pizza Factory

Ernie Amorim started his first Pizza Factory business in 2005 in the city of Gustine. His penchant for hard work and contributing to the community have enabled him to grow the business markedly over the years. Now he owns the Gustine Pizza Factory, as well as another in South Salinas and one in North Salinas. Never one to rest on his laurels, Ernie and his family opened “Mia Fusion Cuisine” in 2018 in the Creekbridge shopping center. In 2020, they opened “Pasta Mia” in Northridge Mall.

Part of the recipe for their company’s success has been investment in their businesses and investment in the community. The Pizza Factory donates pizza to countless school events, nonprofits and churches. They also help sponsor local kids' sport teams and the women’s shelter. A humble man, Ernie recognizes that the success of his family’s businesses is only possible because the community supports them. When asked what he would like to share, he said simply, “I want to make sure the community and our customers know how much we really appreciate them.”

Large Business of the Year: Aera Energy

Since 1952, Aera Energy and its predecessor companies have helped California meet its significant energy needs – right here in Monterey County. As a top oil producer in the state, the energy Aera produces allows millions of Californians to travel to work every day and Monterey County-grown food to arrive at dinner tables.

Aera’s San Ardo-based operations play an important economic role in Monterey County and its employees are known as valued community partners. Aera invests in programs that support local schools, including a pen pal

program with San Ardo School students. During the pandemic, Aera was one of the first major companies to step forward with a \$50,000 donation to the Community Foundation for Monterey. These critical funds help lives that have been upended physically, socially and economically.

Aera has partnered with the Greenfield Community Science Workshop to make their new ScienceMobile and STEM programs possible for South County students. They proudly support the United Way Monterey County, Food Bank for Monterey County and have partnered with King City to redevelop a soccer field for local youth. Aera has been recognized by Forbes as a Best Mid-Size Employer and named Business of the Year by the King City Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture.

Businesswoman of the Year: Patricia Rodriguez (*The Outdoor Market*)

Patricia Rodriguez is a local farmer in Monterey County, who grows her own organic berries. She has participated in many local farmers' markets and understands firsthand how difficult business can be for local farmers. Wanting to help others, Patricia's original idea was to form an outdoor market to help local farmers sell their products within the community. However, farmers' markets are seasonal and Patricia realized that in diversifying the types of goods offered, she could form a year-round business for many. Today, her markets include food vendors, artisans, and farmers/produce vendors.

Charging no fee to farmers, Patricia works closely to ensure all vendors have the appropriate permits, as well as the opportunity to further grow their businesses. Many are new business owners and though they may start small, Patricia is proud to say that she has seen many grow into well-established businesses within our community.

As a consequence of the pandemic, Patricia realized that the need for outdoor markets became even greater so she has made admission free for customers. For her contributions in helping lift others, we recognize Patricia Rodriguez as our Businesswoman of the Year.

Citizen of the Year: Clare Munteer (*Monterey County Rape Crisis Center*)

During her 34 years at the helm of Monterey County Rape Crisis Center, Clare Munteer's accomplishments have been many. After the closure of the Women's Crisis Center in 2007, she led the expansion of services for survivors of sexual assault, child abuse and human trafficking throughout Monterey County. She increased the agency's budget and staff many times over. She was successful in getting the agency out of debt and built a four-month financial reserve in the event of a budget shortfall. She brought in grants that supported free counseling for abused children, having a dedicated advocate on site at CSUMB, and continuing prevention education services for youth after reductions in government funding. Clare received the Talcott Bates Award from the Child Abuse Prevention Council in 2008 and she was selected as one of the 10 Outstanding Women in Monterey County in 2017. For decades, she responded directly to hundreds of clients in crisis and provided emotional support, advocacy and information to them. She trained hundreds of volunteers at biannual sexual assault counselor trainings. She served as "race director" for over 30 years for the agency's biggest fundraiser, the Together with Love Run/Walk. And in 2020, she was able to transition all agency staff and services to remote delivery during the pandemic. Thank you, Clare, for your tremendous contributions!

Ag Leadership Award: Norm Groot (*Farm Bureau Monterey*)

Serving as Executive Director of Farm Bureau Monterey for 10 years, Norm Groot has made a career of agricultural advocacy. Norm served on the California Farm Bureau Board of Directors for 13 years, chairing the Finance Committee for three years. Locally, Norm served six years on the Board of Directors of the Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce and was Chair for 2015. He participates in the Monterey Peninsula Chamber of Commerce's Government Affairs Committee, serves on the Board of Directors for the Monterey Peninsula Taxpayers Association and the Monterey County Convention and Visitors Bureau, is the current Chair of the Community Advisory Council for Central Coast Community Energy, and is active in his Parish at San Carlos Cathedral. He is a past President of the Nursery Growers Association of California, former Chair of the Pacific Horticultural Trade Show Committee, and founding Booster Club President of Santa Margarita Catholic High

School's Marching Band. Norm serves as the founding President of Salinas Valley Agricultural Water Association, formed to monitor implementation of local groundwater sustainability. His recognitions include being named Credit Executive of the Year by CMA Business Services, Los Angeles, and Volunteer of the Year by the California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom.

Spirit of the Community: Mariela Medina (Jacob's Heart)

After surviving cancer THREE times as a teenager, Mariela has dedicated her life's work to empowering teens with cancer and teens bereaved by the loss of a sibling. Mariela has single-handedly built a multi-dimensional program at Jacob's Heart which provides on-going peer mentorship to nearly 100 teens struggling with identity issues, isolation, depression, and existential questions during and after cancer. She mentors teens who have experienced similar trauma to what she endured, helping them build resilience not just in spite of, but because of cancer. Her latest project is turning post-traumatic stress into post-traumatic growth. Many local teens credit Mariela's support with saving their lives, including 16-year-old osteosarcoma survivor Andrew Perez. He said, "I had totally given up and didn't want any more treatment, but Mariela encouraged me to keep trying. I realized that she had been through worse than me, so I figured 'If she can do it, so can I.' Honestly, I owe my life to her." Having gone from being a Jacob's Heart teen to a survivor, Mariela makes a tremendous difference to Jacob's Heart families.

Event Presenting Sponsor: Mechanics Bank

Corporate Sponsors (to date): Bay Federal Credit Union; Kasavan Architects; Credit Consulting Services; Braga Fresh Family Farms; RHC Management (McDonald's); D'Arrigo Brothers of California; Alliant Insurance Services; American AgCredit; Aera Energy; Hastie Financial Group; Fenton & Keller; Chevron; Cecilia Kennedy Insurance Services; Alvarez Technology Group; MBS Business Systems, Monterey County Housing Authority Development Corporation.

For more information, call (831) 751-7725 or visit www.SalinasChamber.com.

The Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce is an association of about 700 businesses and organizations, representing thousands of local employees and stakeholders. The Chamber is dedicated to Creating a Strong Local Economy, Promoting the Community, Providing Networking Opportunities, Representing the Interests of Business with Government, and Taking Political Action. To learn more, visit www.SalinasChamber.com or call (831) 751-7725.
