

OTHER VOICES: Kern County needs to be proactive about its future

By Katie Valenzuela

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Some of you may remember my father, Vernon Valenzuela. He passed away in 2012 after serving as the first team leader for the Bakersfield Veterans Center. He was an ardent advocate for veterans and families, and just earned a distinct honor by having the new Veterans Resource Center at his alma mater, Bakersfield College, dedicated in his name.

I'm proud to be from Kern County. I grew up in Oildale, spending my spare time playing sports and volunteering for the Kern County Network for Children as well as Mayor Harvey Hall's Youth Advisory Committee. I left home after graduating from North High School in 2004 to study community development at UC Davis.

My dad and I always talked about how I would eventually come home and help make Kern County a better place. But that didn't happen.

Don't get me wrong — I wanted to come home. When I was finishing graduate school, my dad was sick, and I was making several trips a month down from Sacramento to be with him and my family. I wanted to be here to help my family and to carry forward my dad's vision for his hometown. But the reality that I wouldn't move back home was something my dad and I had accepted several months before I graduated.

I am a severe asthmatic, and my asthma had gotten measurably better since I moved north. A big contributor to my struggle when I lived here was the fact that my family lived in a community surrounded by oil industry activity, which has been proven time and time again to be harmful to public health — both directly from the oil extraction and processing activities, and indirectly as trucks and trailers moved through the community to facilitate that work. Moving back here would have had a huge negative impact on my health.

The final conclusion to stay in Sacramento came after several months of job hunting in preparation for graduation when it became apparent that there simply were no real job opportunities for me in Kern County. My dad reluctantly concluded that I could do more good with my career if I stayed in Sacramento, so I did.

I don't deny that oil is an important economic driver for our community, but having our economy so dependent on one industry isn't healthy. Layoffs in the oil industry aren't new, and there are not a lot of alternatives for those workers. I know folks who have recently been laid off from the oil industry and are now facing a harsh reality that there are no other job opportunities for them in this region.

The Board of Supervisors hearing on Tuesday presents a real opportunity. California has more resources than we've ever had before, and a significant portion of them are dedicated to providing a meaningful economic transition for workers in the oil industry. We now have a governor who is openly discussing how our climate policy will help places like Kern County have a more robust and diverse economy, and he's willing to put policy and significant resources behind that commitment.

My dad always believed that we should put politics aside and focus on community. He didn't care if you were a Democrat or a Republican; he taught me and everyone he worked with that if we stayed focused on our shared goals, anything is possible.

While I have moved away and made my home in Sacramento, my family — including my young nephews, who my Dad never got a chance to meet — are still here, and I want what my dad would have wanted for them: the opportunity to thrive.

Let's be thoughtful and proactive about our future. We all share a goal of ensuring that kids are healthy, young adults have access to good careers and Kern County has a thriving economy. These things do not have to be mutually exclusive and are possible if we work together and act now.

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