

# MCC developing app to help troubled teens

BY PAUL MARYNIAK  
Tribune Executive Editor

**H**elp for Arizona teens in crisis and mental or emotional duress could one day become only a touch away.

Students and faculty members from Mesa Community College and the multi-community college Maricopa Information Technology Institute - East Valley are developing a mobile app that aims for two separate but related functions.

Teens in crisis or under duress can quickly find mental health or other professionals. And people of any age can report teens who may pose a danger to themselves or others.

The project began after Mesa Chamber of Commerce President/CEO Sally Harrison and Chandler educator Katey McPherson – both vocal advocates for teen suicide prevention and mental health wellness – presented the college's IT-related faculty with a Utah app that has produced stunning results.

Called SafeUT, the smartphone app is a statewide service that provides real-time crisis intervention to Utah's students, parents, and educators at no cost.

Developed under the auspices of the Utah Legislature and governor, it enables stu-



The staff leading the app's development include, from left: Front row: Mike Bogner, Tech-nopreneur Experience lead programming professor; Diane Meza, director of Maricopa IT Institute - East Valley; back row: Dr Angeline Surber, Mesa Community College Computer Information Systems chair; Dr Beb LaVergne, MCC Computer Information Systems Program director; and Helen Bland, Computer Information Systems administrative specialist senior. (Pablo Robles/Tribune Staff Photographer)

dents in crisis to open a two-way messaging service with master's level clinicians, call a crisis counselor directly, or submit confidential tips to school administrators on bullying, threats, violence and other etc.

Master's level crisis counselors man it 24/7/365 and, according to a report by the University of Utah, it "has been rec-

ognized nationwide for its effectiveness in saving lives and de-escalating potential school incidents."

Schools have the option to enroll in the Utah service and by the end of the 2019-20 school year, more than 87 percent of all public and private K-12 schools, colleges and universities were signed up.

## SCALING DOWN FROM PAGE 3

will be no vendors at the event.

The following are prohibited from the drive-in show: alcohol; glass bottles; grills or heating equipment for cooking food; firearms; fireworks/sparklers/firecrackers; laser pointers.

For more information, visit [azcelebrationoffreedom.org](http://azcelebrationoffreedom.org).

Those who catch the Saturday night fireworks show can "double dip," with shows in Chandler, Gilbert, Scottsdale and Queen Creek on July 4.

A little south of Mesa, a smaller fire-

works show takes place at Schnepf Family Farms near South Rittenhouse and East Cloud roads in Queen Creek. Christ the King Church's "Freedom Project" has been hosted here since 2014.

This year's event starts at 4 p.m. July 4 with live music, foam pit, face painting, artisan vendors, food trucks, beer and wine bar, capped by a 20-minute fireworks show after dark.

Gilbert Regional Park at 3005 E. Queen Creek Road will host a celebration that starts with a show by a Garth Brooks cover band 7:15-8:45 p.m. Food trucks will be on hand and the fireworks start at 8:45

p.m., weather permitting. Information: [gilbertaz.gov/july4th](http://gilbertaz.gov/july4th).

Chandler is holding its celebration at Tumbleweed Park, 745 E. Germann Road, with gates opening at 7:30 p.m. and fireworks at 9 p.m. Like Mesa, spectators will have to stay in or near their vehicles.

We're not quite back to normal, as Giles noted, but we are getting closer.

"Pre-COVID, Mesa had the 'Celebration of Freedom.' It was a great fireworks show but a lot more than that," Giles said. "We had a naturalization ceremony, food vendors, games for the kids. It was really a site to behold, a county fair type event.

## PYRO FROM PAGE 3

For most, he said, "At best it's a glorified hobby.

If you're in it for the pay, you're in the wrong place."

While the firecrackers themselves don't change much over the years, Victor said he wants to make every Independence Day celebration different.

"I take a lot of time planning out the body of the show, planning out what should be in the grand finale."

He's been shooting off the fireworks show in Mesa for seven years, first at the Mesa Amphitheater before the show moved to the Fiesta Mall last year and this weekend.

He wouldn't give away any secrets about the show here July 3, other than to make a big promise:

"The best way I can describe it is: something amazing and spectacular."

Victor has been shooting fireworks for 30 years, during the big 4th celebrations, weddings, corporate events, high school graduations, homecomings and sporting events.

He enjoys putting new spins on something that's been around for hundreds of years.

The MCC project is still in development, although McPherson said, "Our hope is to pilot it in three Mesa Public Schools in the next year and from there hopefully it would grow statewide. It will be a long three-to-five-year process to roll out and work out bugs."

"What I love most is that kids can chat and text into seven University of Utah clinicians that can intervene and make an action plan with the kid's parents or family or just listen," she said. "It is widely used by kids – lots of success."

The Arizona app, called ReachOutAZ, is still in development but a demonstration of the prototype can be viewed at [youtube.com/watch?v=Dop1XTIHOkA](https://youtube.com/watch?v=Dop1XTIHOkA).

In the video, the narrator explains that the pilot program would target students in grades 7-12.

One Scottsdale Unified School District principal who watched the video remarked, "We should have this in all of our schools for our students. We need this more now than ever."

She wasn't understating the need.

Even before anyone heard of COVID-19, experts and teens themselves were sounding the alarm about the pressures that al-

SEE APP PAGE 10

The cherry on top was the fireworks show.

"I think we're all looking forward to getting back to a full blown ceremony."

He hopes Mesa will be ready for a return to the amphitheater and a big blowout in 2022. "You never really know, but we're all expecting COVID will be in the rear-view mirror by then." ■

### If You Go...

**What:** Fireworks show

**When:** 9 p.m. Saturday, July 3.

**Where:** Parking lot of Fiesta Mall, 1425 W. Southern Ave. The parking lot will open at 7 p.m.

"According to historical data, fireworks were created by the Chinese," Victor noted. "They accidentally created fireworks when they lit gunpowder on fire, then they thought, 'Wow, this is cool.'"

"Originally, they set off fireworks to chase away demons and devils."

Does it work?

"Never chased away any of mine."

Ka-boom. ■

# Fire devastated Tonto Forest near Globe

BY GIANLUCA D'ELIA  
Cronkite News

Behind closed road signs in evacuated small towns 90 miles east of Gilbert and Mesa, blackened trees stand slathered with pink fire retardant as dust devils from the ashes of the Telegraph Fire swirl past.

Since igniting June 4, the wildfire has chewed through nearly 180,750 acres in the Tonto National Forest, damaging 52 structures but causing no injuries or fatalities. Fire officials opened some affected areas to reporters Wednesday, offering a first look at the blaze, which was 89 percent contained last Thursday.

APP FROM PAGE 6

ready had made suicide the second leading cause of death among people ages 10-24.

In the East Valley, more than 50 boys and girls have taken their lives since August 2018.

The pandemic and its disruptive and isolating impact have become another factor in a social-mental-emotional crisis that has been fueled for years by the pressure for good grades, social media, bullying, drug and alcohol abuse and problems at home.

The Centers for Disease Control last week reported that in 2020, "the proportion of mental health-related emergency department visits among adolescents aged 12-17 years increased 31 percent compared with that during 2019.

"In May 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, ED visits for suspected suicide attempts began to increase among adolescents aged 12-17 years, especially girls. During February 21-March 20, 2021, suspected suicide attempt ED visits were 50.6 percent higher among girls aged 12-17 years than during the same period in 2019; among boys aged 12-17 years, suspected suicide attempt ED visits increased 3.7 percent," the CDC continued.

As easy as the app's use might seem, building it is another story, according to Diane Meza, director of Maricopa IT Institute - East Valley, and Dr. Deb LaVergne, MCC Computer Information Systems Program director.

Students who have been working on it are part of the institute's Technopreneur Experience. Three - Patrick Wheeler, Han-

The Telegraph Fire is one of the largest Arizona wildfires in the state's history. Last year's Bush Fire spread across 193,000 acres, according to InciWeb, an interagency wildfire information system. The 2011 Wallow Fire, Arizona's largest, burned more than 500,000 acres.

Public information officers for the fire said Telegraph's growth has been fed by excessive heat, long-term drought and high winds.

The area southwest of Globe is accustomed to seasonal wildfires and expected to recover, said Molly Hunter, a University of Arizona fire ecologist, and Telegraph Fire public information officer Virginia Price.

Pushing back scorched soil along a trail off State Route 77, Hunter uncovered dirt

that still was light brown. She said soil, grass and plants in the region have mostly burned at their surfaces and will grow back within a year. The loss of shrub coverage also helps to reduce additional fire threats.

"There's some char on it and some ash, but the bark is still there," Hunter said, crouching over a burned bush and examining its bare branches. "Once you get a little bit of moisture, it'll start producing new leaves.

"The grasses, in particular, are going to love this fire. As long as there is significant moisture this year, by next year, you'll see grasses rebounding."

Lower temperatures and rain on Wednesday helped efforts to contain the blaze. Now that monsoon season has arrived, the ex-

colleges as well as MCC.

Basically, the institute takes students who have already attained a certificate or associates degree in a computer-related field and gives them the experience that companies are seeking. The goal is to get those students jobs.

The Technopreneur Experience program also helps small businesses not only with employment but in the development of apps they might normally be unable to afford.

"Whoever wants to come in our students can actually create those as practice and work with an industry partner and (students) get those workforce skills," Meza said.

Meza described ReachOutAZ as a service providing a range of crisis responses, depending on the seriousness of a situation.

She said the students and faculty participating in its development "are all putting in above-and-beyond time because they believe so passionately in this.

"There's so many people on the team that have been affected by suicides alone - either families, friends, friends of friends - and we all kind of came on and shared stories before we even started this...That's been just amazing," Meza said.

Though Meza noted that some apps are relatively easy to develop, ReachOutAZ is anything but - largely because of all the layers of information involved.

"We want to make sure that there's enough data that can be disseminated to the right triage person," Meza explained.

"When you think about an app," she continued, "there's a whole lot of variables. That means a lot of people. There's a lot of places you can click and go to and each one of those areas where somebody can

pected storms will help restore moisture to the terrain in Gila County.

For days, aircrafts also have dropped a retardant containing fertilizer to slow the fire and restore moisture to the soil.

Firefighters from as far away as Madras, Oregon, responded to the Telegraph Fire. Bob Sjolund, division supervisor of Northwest Team 6, has spent the past two weeks on the fire lines. He said both residents of nearby towns and the ecosystem itself are awaiting rainfall from monsoon storms.

"The landscape, the animals need that to happen to give it a fresh start," he said.

"The big picture here is that folks who do put their homes in the urban interface, it is a challenge for wildland firefighters." ■

click has to be developed."

LaVergne listed some of the tasks involved: "Gather requirements from clients; determine scope, storyboard the project, create logos or images as needed; create the initial app user interface; develop the code to run the app and the backend database; repeatedly present and communicate with the clients for feedback."

Then there is, she added, "make adjustments to scope, interface, and code based on feedback; complete internal testing; make adjustments based on test results; submit app to the app store for approval; and pilot initial release of the app, followed by updates before widespread release."

And while Meza, LaVergne and the rest of the team are doing all that, Harrison and McPherson are looking for a school district and possibly a municipality to team up and support the program.

"We're still working out details...Lots of people to make sure that all the bugs are worked out before we file it, but we will be looking at some schools to pilot this with us soon," Meza added.

"The challenges with this particular app are that you have to find somebody who's willing to maintain it and update it and whatever else is needed," she said. "We're in conversations now and we do have interest."

While she stressed, "I'm not gonna say it's completely ready because there's so many tweaks and things," Meza is hopeful that interest will lead to whatever funding and anything else is needed to make ReachOutAZ a reality.

"So far our efforts have been looking pretty positive," she said, "but nothing is set in stone." ■

The ReachOutAZ app is still in development but people can see a demonstration on YouTube. (Special to the Tribune)

nah Cheloha, and Alycia Saris - have been involved in the entire process so far.

Faculty participants include three Technopreneur Experience professors - Mike Bogner, lead programming; Phil Waclawski, database and networking; and Dave Levy, iOS programming - as well as Dr. Angeline Surber, Computer Information Systems chair and Helen Bland, Computer Information Systems administrative specialist senior.

The IT Institute serves Rio Salado, Chandler-Gilbert and Scottsdale community