

EAST BAY TIMES

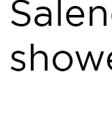
New head of Santa Clara County Fair is deeply rooted in local agriculture

Salene Duarte wants to create a place for others to build lasting memories



Karl Mondon/ Bay Area News Group

Salene Duarte stands behind a Santa Clara County Fair mascot from the mid-'80s in this file photo. Duarte, whose experience with the fair began at age 9, was recently named executive director of the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds Management Corporation. "My vision is to create a place where others can build lasting memories like I did," Duarte says of her new role.



By **ANNE GELHAUS** | Bay Area News Group

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Salene Duarte's experience with the Santa Clara County Fair began at age 9, when she showed her first sheep as a 4-H Club member.

Over the years as a fairgrounds volunteer and consultant, Duarte's roles included reviewing and formatting entry books, overseeing barn layouts, managing livestock operations, organizing home arts exhibits, and coordinating awards and judging.

This extensive background in all things county fair-related led to Duarte's appointment last month as executive director of the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds Management Corporation.

As a staff member, Duarte served as the Santa Clara County Fair manager until June 2024. She was then appointed co-interim director alongside Armando Carlos, stepping into the permanent position on June 1.

"My vision is to create a place where others can build lasting memories like I did," Duarte says, recalling winning her first Grand Champion title with her steer, Shiloh, as a high school member of the Future Farmers of America. "I remember the nerves and excitement of showing my first lamb and the pride I felt when my steer won champion honors—a moment I'll never forget."

"That's what I want to offer: a welcoming home for our community, a hub where everyone can celebrate what matters to them—through festivals, expos, sports and more—in a way that's meaningful and memorable."

Duarte takes her work home with her to the East San Jose foothills, where she and her husband, a high school agriculture teacher, run a 100-acre cattle operation with a focus on raising and selling high-quality show calves to local youth for county fairgrounds competitions.

She comes by her passion honestly. Duarte was born and raised in Campbell, where her mother's family owned and operated a trucking business, hauling fruits, nuts and vegetables throughout the valley.

"Salene's deep-rooted passion for the fairgrounds is evident through her history," Santa Clara County Fairgrounds Management Corporation Board Chair Vicky Bosworth said in a release. "She brings a wealth of experience, a clear vision for the future and an open mind ready to embrace new ideas."

So far, these new ideas have included transitioning the fair to a virtual format during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As fair manager, Duarte worked to revitalize the fairgrounds by introducing youth and open livestock shows, reactivating underutilized spaces and leading the return of a 10-day county fair in 2023—the first in over 20 years.

Under her leadership, the fairgrounds expanded its agriculture education programming to include livestock exhibits, competitive displays, historical presentations and the establishment of the Junior Livestock Auction Buyers Coalition.

When asked what she loves most about the fairgrounds, Duarte's responds: "the smile on people's faces as they enjoy the magic of this place."