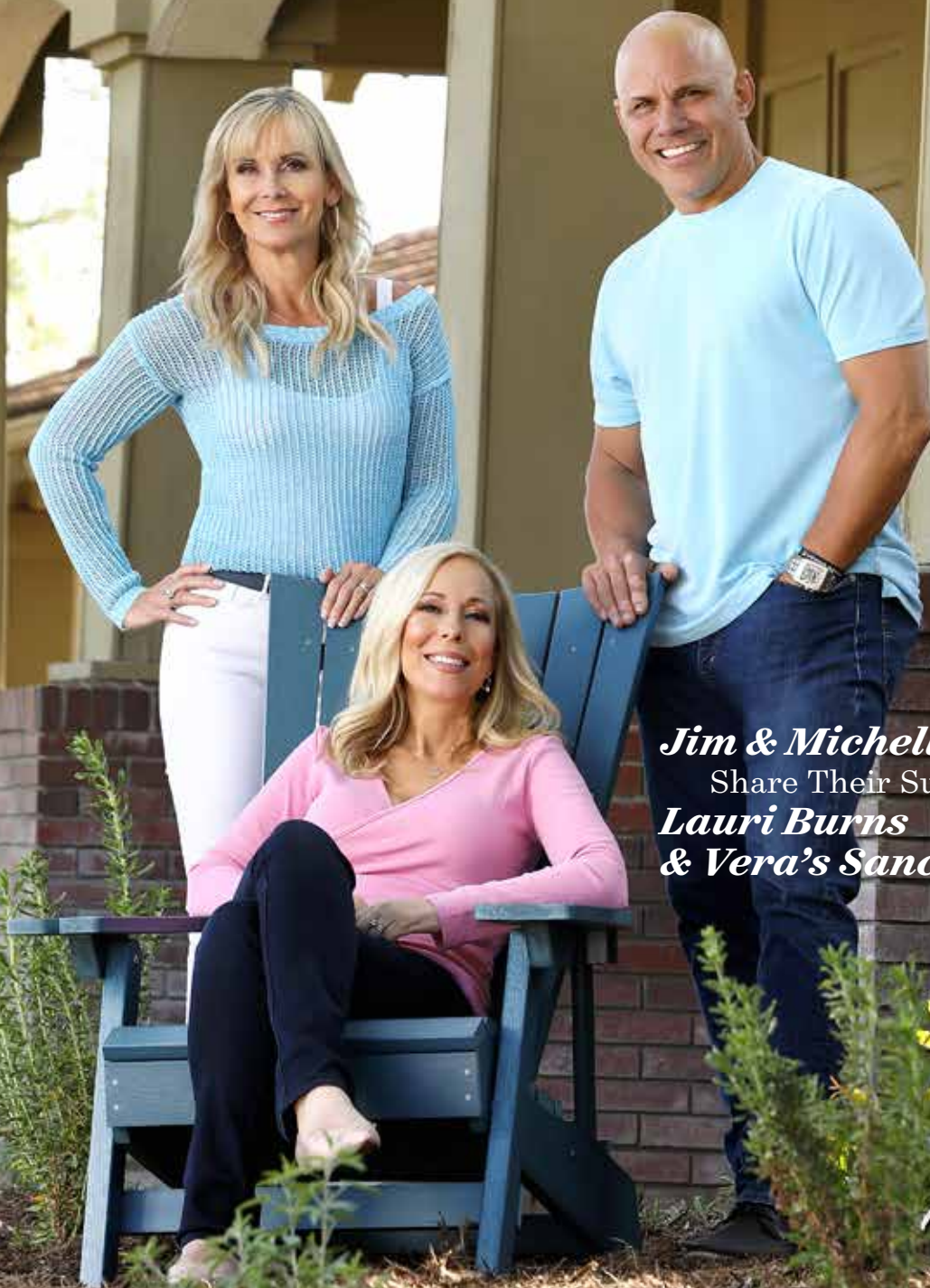


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Coto  
LIVING

June 2019



***Jim & Michelle Leyritz***

Share Their Support of

***Lauri Burns***

***& Vera's Sanctuary***

*Farville*  
PHOTOGRAPHY



# Jim & Michelle Leyritz

## Share Their Support of

# Lauri Burns

# & Vera's Sanctuary

This month, *Coto Living* takes a detour from our typical feature family article structure to share a very special story. This is a story of pain turned to passion, an undeniable purpose, and an outpouring of support from the Coto community to help an inspirational organization. It's our honor to introduce Lauri Burns, founder of The Teen Project, as well as Coto residents, Jim and Michelle Leyritz, who, along with countless members of the Coto community, have supported Burns and her amazing work.

### Lauri Burns' Teen Project and Vera's Sanctuary

The title of Lauri Burns' book, *Punished for Purpose*, hits the nail ever so squarely on the head. The book details her true-life story of abuse, hardship, and her inspirational work to turn her life around. Burns lived an incredibly difficult childhood while grow-



ing up in foster care and endured unimaginable hardships upon exiting the system. Burns took the steps to turn her life around and is now devoted to saving foster girls like herself.



To date, Burns has raised 36 foster kids in her home. In 2007, she founded The Teen Project charity to help foster kids get back on their feet. Today the charity has 126 beds throughout southern

California. They call themselves "a parent to the parentless," providing the necessary support to assist the most vulnerable girls from foster care.

Last year Burns purchased the former Boys Town property and is now transforming it into a safe haven sanctuary for foster girls, ages 15-21, who have been victims of human trafficking. Perched on a hill with sweeping views of the Trabuco Canyon, the site has five stunning homes with 30 beds and a swimming pool. It provides a peaceful setting, filled with healing and love for young women who have endured far too much.

Vera's Sanctuary was named for the mother of a man who donated \$1 million for Burns to secure the site. Although the donor wanted to remain anonymous, the site was named after his mother, Vera, who passed away from cancer when he was a child, leaving him to grow up in an orphanage. Burns honors her most substantial donors by naming each of the five homes after them, with one home name still up for grabs.

### The Coto community steps up to support Vera's Sanctuary

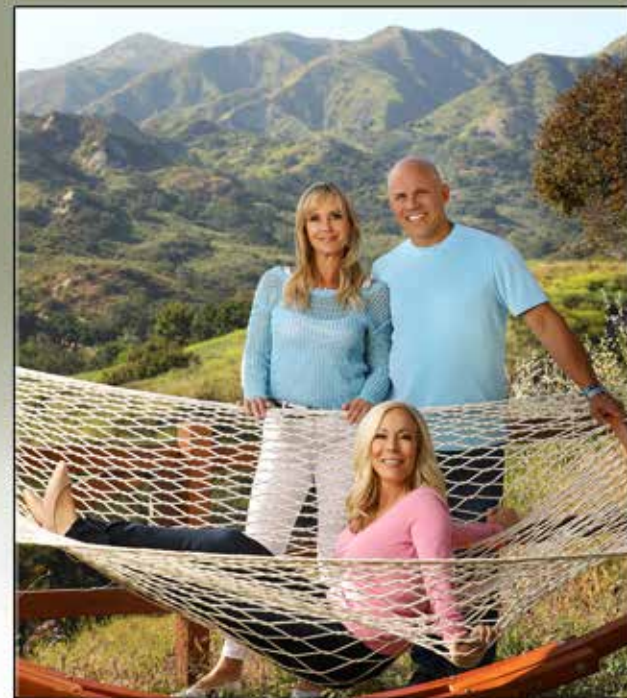
Many of our Coto neighbors participated over the holidays in restoring Vera's Sanctuary. Burns explains that "We believe where a child lives reflects on how they feel about themselves and who

...

coto gives back



Jim & Michelle Leyritz & the numerous Coto residents who have supported Lauri Burns & Vera's Sanctuary



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Doni Orsini (Owner of Olivia's Closet) & Lauri Burns in the on-site boutique at Vera's Sanctuary

coined Hot August Nights, to help support the financial needs of the new Vera's Sanctuary site. This event will be crucial to funding the first year of operation while licensing and funding approvals are in progress.

The Bullock-Russell Real Estate team has been an instrumental source of support. They helped with the initial cleanup of the sanctuary, donated furniture and other home goods, and have been the primary source for decorating all the homes. A member of their team has also offered their home as an evacuation site in the event of an emergency at the sanctuary.



Bullock-Russell Realty Team

The National Charity League's Canyon Chapter, comprised of several Coto residents, is also dedicated to the support of Burns. Their chapter recently planned and hosted a baby shower for a Vera's Sanctuary resident and also worked at a fundraiser supporting The Teen Project.



Michelle & Jim Leyritz

Jim was raised in Cincinnati, OH, and attended the University of Kentucky, where he pursued his lifelong passion of playing baseball. Despite never being drafted, Jim was signed by the New York Yankees as an amateur free agent and made his professional MLB debut as a NY Yankee in 1990. He spent 11 years in the big leagues as a catcher, infielder, and designated hitter. He played for various teams, including the California Angels, Los Angeles Dodgers, San Diego Padres, and Boston Red Sox. Having spent the majority of his MLB career with the Yankees, Jim is best known for hitting numerous post-season, playoff and World Series home runs, which either won, tied or changed the momentum of several World Series.

they think they are." For that reason, the homes are upscale and beautifully decorated. They even have an on-site boutique with brand new clothing donated by Doni Orsini, owner of Olivia's Closet in RSM.

One of our Coto neighbors will be hosting a much-needed fundraiser on August 17,

Jim is currently the VP of business development for a title insurance company in NY and serves as either a spokesperson or board member for several charities.

Michelle is an Orange County native. Her family owned citrus farms in central CA before moving to Newport Beach and eventually settling in Mission Viejo. She attended Capistrano Valley High School and Cal State Fullerton and owns her own line of children's apparel and gifts. She also works part-time as a project manager for a local interior design firm specializing in upscale, custom window coverings.

### How did the Leyritz family land in Coto?

Jim and Michelle met in New York more than a decade ago at the renowned Elaine's restaurant. Nearly a year after that meeting, Jim contacted Michelle during the postseason and made a bet that if the Yankees beat the Angels, he would fly out to CA to visit her, but if the Angels beat the Yankees, she would fly to NY to visit him. Although the Angels lost, Michelle could not make the trip and did not live up to her end of the bargain. But Jim refused to relent. The following month, he invited Michelle to Arizona for a Yankee Fantasy Camp and she agreed. They dated coast-to-coast for the following two years and during that time, Jim fell in love with Coto de Caza after attending a dinner party here. A lifelong horse owner and outdoorsman, Jim appreciated the wide-open spaces of Coto and the serene feeling of community nestled within its rolling hills. After driving through the gates for the first time, Jim firmly declared, "If you and I make it together, I am moving to Coto and living here with you." And so it goes....Jim and his boys moved to Coto in 2011, with Michelle and her girls joining them after Jim and Michelle became engaged in 2013.

### What is the inspiration behind Jim's book *Catching Heat*?

*Catching Heat* was originally written in 2007 under the title *The King and Dad*. It was about never giving up, making it to the big leagues without being drafted, being successful in a city as intense as New York (earning the nickname "The King" by colleagues and fans), and then deciding to give it all up to come home and take care of his boys in order to be the best teammate of all -- DAD. It was about Jim's own father, the sacrifices he made for his family, and the sacrifices Jim ultimately made for his own family. Intended to be a Father's Day book, it was slated to come out in June 2008, but because of Jim's involvement in a devastating car accident in 2007, it never went to publication. Instead, Jim spent the next three years waiting for a trial to prove his innocence. During that experience, Jim's faith was tested in numerous ways. He decided to add three more chapters and changed the name to *Catching Heat*. The book was co-authored by Jeffrey and Douglas Lyons (with wife Michelle as a ghostwriter) and highlights Jim's professional highs and lows on the baseball field, as well as the dramatic and painful lessons he experienced in his personal life. It is ultimately a story about pursuing dreams, coping with loss, keeping the faith, and always speaking one's truth.

### How did the Leyritz family get involved in supporting The Teen Project?

Jim and Michelle have always been passionate about charity work, specifically organizations that benefit children. One of Jim's fondest memories is of the day he hit the biggest home run in New York history (ultimately sparking the Yankees Dynasty that began in 1996) — not because he won another World Series' ring, but because it was the same day that two young boys he was fostering were adopted into their forever family. Michelle and her daughters have been actively involved in charity work for many years through both Saddleback Church and Lion's Heart. A plea for help from Lion's Heart ultimately led Michelle to Lauri Burns and The Teen Project.

Since then, Jim and Michelle have spent countless hours at the houses, helped to host a baby shower for an expectant resident, and have worked to rally donors for the organization. Jim, now an executive board member of The Teen Project, is eager to help spread the word about the amazing work Lauri is doing right here in Trabuco Canyon. "Oftentimes we unknowingly focus our charity efforts on regions and organizations that don't directly impact our own communities, especially here in affluent Orange County," Jim explained. "Michelle and I consider our family blessed to live here in Coto and are thankful to be a part of the amazing and meaningful work Lauri is doing in our own backyard."

When *Coto Living* asked Lauri Burns to share what Jim and Michelle mean to her, she had this to say, "Jim and Michelle were there on day one, when the homes were in a state of despair. They came in, rolled up their sleeves, and were committed to doing whatever it took to get us up and running. Jim's commitment to helping people in need is limitless. He has tremendous compassion and an undying commitment that was instrumental in helping us put the site together in such a short time frame. We are forever indebted to their family for their service to our Vera's Sanctuary community."

**To learn more about Lauri Burns and ways that you can support The Teen Project, visit [www.theteenproject.com/donate](http://www.theteenproject.com/donate).**

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