

An Open Letter to the Santa Barbara Community From Thomas J. Barrack, Jr.

The windswept face of Grass Mountain and the oak tree studded hills of the Santa Ynez Valley are once again the backdrop for a global drama of epic proportion. Michael Jackson has died at the age of 50 on the eve of a universal comeback.

As his family, friends and millions of fans across the globe seek outlets in which to express their grief, Michael's only true home, the Neverland Ranch, has become a temporary sanctuary where fans and family can still feel the presence of his kind and compassionate soul.

The universal curiosity about Neverland and its connection to Michael is an unchangeable fact. How grieving fans are treated as they arrive to pay their respects will be viewed with great interest by the world. As we all know, the impressions left by Michael's last interaction with Santa Barbara County were not positive.

Consequently, I would like to simply frame the issue upon which we all need to focus: It is a reality that the world will quickly descend on Santa Barbara and Neverland as fans continue to grieve, and as Michael's legacy gains perhaps more appreciation after his death than during his life.

We must be prepared for the fact that visitors and fans will come, with or without permission or an invitation. As a consequence, all actions being taken at the moment are aimed at creating a well thought out and coordinated plan amongst the family, the Sheriff, the County regulatory agencies, the fire department, local proprietors, local press, local residents and the Highway Patrol to protect and preserve the interests of all constituencies.

We must also prepare to accommodate Michael's family's wishes as they contemplate the location of his final resting place and their own return to the tranquil grounds of the Michael Jackson family compound.

Michael Jackson was accused, tried and acquitted in our county and found innocent on all counts. As Michael's final arrangements are planned, his family's wishes should be welcomed by this county with open arms. Let's adopt an attitude of hospitality, warmth, and tolerance and allow the world to pay their respects to this global icon by conducting ourselves with grace and elegance.

The consideration of the future of the Neverland property will be addressed in due time through normal process and with appropriate deliberation. Right now, the imperative is to be responsive at a sensitive moment in which the world is watching us and observing our conduct as we mourn the loss of one of our own long-time residents.

I have been a horse rancher and farmer in the Santa Ynez Valley for more than

three decades and have raised my children to continue the legacy of stewardship and preservation that we all value so highly in this magical valley.

Our peaceful pastures are imbued with a Western tradition of kindness and hospitality, free of fence lines or locked gates. We further flourished from the legacy of a strong Chumash culture and civilization which became the footprints remaining in the minds of all those who visited this majestic world. This is our chance to teach the world what "mi casa es su casa" really means.

Padre Junipero Serra, pioneer California missionary, described the future site of Santa Barbara as a "dismal and treeless" place when he first saw it in April 1782. It has taken the work of generations of dedicated people to create a county known throughout the world for its beauty. Let us all keep in mind that reputations are earned in decades and lost in moments of haste and bad decisions.

Let us allow the world and our visitors to taste a few drops of the magic elixir that is the metaphysical mix between the beautiful Santa Ynez Valley sculpted by the soft hands of God, and the warm and kind environment crafted by the hands of its residents.

Joanne Lessner
Owen Blicksilver Public Relations, Inc.