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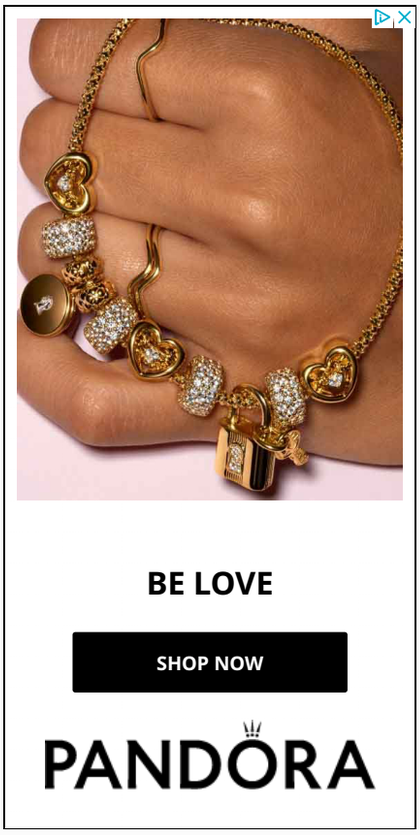
CSUMB senior focuses on fun in First Night Monterey poster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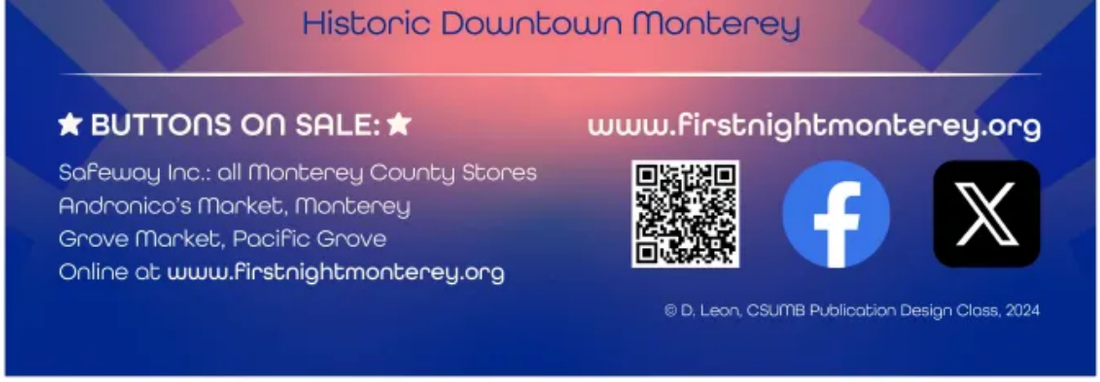

This year's First Night Monterey poster was designed by Cal State Monterey Bay senior Dara Leon. (Design by Dara Leon)

By ARIANNA NALBACH | arinalbach@montereyherald.com
UPDATED: December 14, 2024 at 2:41 PM PST

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MONTEREY – First Night Monterey has welcomed Monterey into the New Year for over 30 years with a popular all-ages event.

And since 2003 the program has depended on one Cal State Monterey Bay communication design student to create the visual identity of each year's celebration.

First Night Monterey Creative Director Ellen Martin visited the Publication Design class, taught by lecturer Lawrence Omoto, with a competition to create the official poster design, buttons and accompanying materials for the event. This year, 21-year-old CSUMB senior Dara Leon won the competition.

Leon said that throughout the design process, Martin came in to give feedback on students' poster and button designs individually and ensure the designs had what she was looking for. After students had finished their designs, Martin's team voted on their favorites – Leon's design had initially been the second favorite.

"The guy that got first, he looked at me in class andhe was like, 'I think you're going to have to end up doing it,'" because he would be too busy to do additional work for First Night Monterey. Martin later reached out to Leon to inform her that her design was selected. "I was like, wow, it's a lot to take on. That's really exciting."

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CSUMB senior Dara Leon said she was thankful for the opportunity to design for First Night Monterey 2025. (Photo courtesy of Dara Leon)

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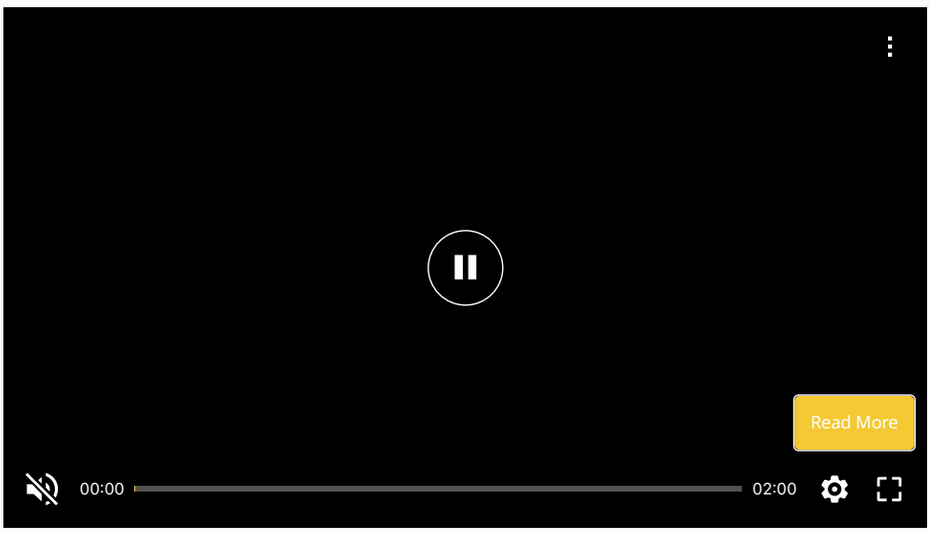
Leon also expressed that she was happy with the changes her design made throughout the process. “It’s crazy to see how differently my designs shifted since that first initial meeting with (Martin),” she said. “I knew that I wanted something kind of symmetrical and with a lot of fun elements, but she always wanted more and so I was like, all right, I can do more. I can make this vibrant and colorful and awesome.”



Thinking back on the design process, Leon said she went through a lot of different iterations and spent a lot of time tweaking the color and layout to best represent the event. The experience, from working with the client to getting a new portfolio piece, has also been a great step in preparing for the design world outside of college for Leon.

“I think this is going to be extremely helpful because it’s such an established citywide event,” she said, mentioning she had gone to previous years’ events. “I think it’s just such a good opportunity to establish myself in the kind of publication design world that I want to go into after graduating. This is just a really, really good step. I’m so extremely thankful to actually get the scope of how big this opportunity is, which is insane to me, honestly.”

After graduating in the spring, Leon wants to work in printing publications like brochures and posters. Working on First Night Monterey has given Leon an idea of what working with a client as a professional will be like.

While every student is responsible for making a poster and button designs – which First Night attendees purchase as their tickets for the event – the winner is also responsible for creating social media posts, making any additional edits needed to their designs and any additional design materials needed.

Leon said when entering the communication design program, she wasn’t sure what she wanted to go into and changed her mind multiple times, but found her passion in publication design.

“I finally was able to take a class where I excelled and I was like, I can really do something awesome and do stuff that people like which has led to this really fun citywide event that people are going to be able to see,” Leon said.

Leon and her family are all excited to see the event.

“My dad already bought all of our buttons and stuff,” she said. “It’s exciting to see what everyone’s doing to make it happen, like all the artists and all the people that actually work there painting backdrops and stuff based on my designs as well. It’s just really, really cool to see everything kind of come together.”

First Night Monterey activities will kick off at 3 p.m. Dec. 31 and go until midnight. Buttons (i.e. tickets) to attend First Night Monterey are on sale online at www.firstnightmonterey.org or you can purchase in person at all Monterey County Safeway stores, Andronico’s Market in Monterey and Grove Market in Pacific Grove.

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