SJSU documentary highlights social inequities

By Brandon Nicolas
STAFF WRITER

The San Jose State Human Rights Institute released a documentary alongside its 2022 Silicon Valley Pain Index report, providing a statistical overview of structured inequalities to inform policy practice in the Silicon Valley.

William Armaline, director of the Human Rights Institute and sociology professor, along with Scott Myers-Lipton, lead author and sociology professor, released the third annual report earlier this year.

The report exposes the social injustices and human rights issues regarding African Americans, Pacific Islanders, Indigenous Americans and the Latinx community in the Silicon Valley.

"The whole point of the pain index is for us to give an annual measure to how our county is doing regarding social issues, like police violence, housing and the wealth gap," Armaline said.

With the help of a grant from the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, former SJSU professor and documentary filmmaker, Bob Gliner, started production on the documentary shortly after the 2022 Silicon Valley Pain Index report was released.

"Basically, [Gliner] got a hold of Scott after we put out the 2022 index," Armaline said. "He had the idea of giving some faces and some visual narrative to the realities that we exposed in the index, and folks were open to it."

Gliner said he produced around 50 films and documentaries for PBS stations around the country.

"The challenge was taking what was rather dry statistics and putting flesh and blood on them – putting people behind the statistics," Gliner said.

Myers-Lipton said he had the idea for a Silicon Valley Pain Index after seeing Bill Quigley's Katrina Pain Index in 2016, a report on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Following the May 25, 2020 murder of George Floyd, Myers-Lipton said he was committed to producing a pain index pertaining to Silicon Valley.

"I asked myself, 'What if I put together a pain index to show how institutionalized racism and white supremacy play out right here in the Silicon Valley,' " Myers-Lipton said.

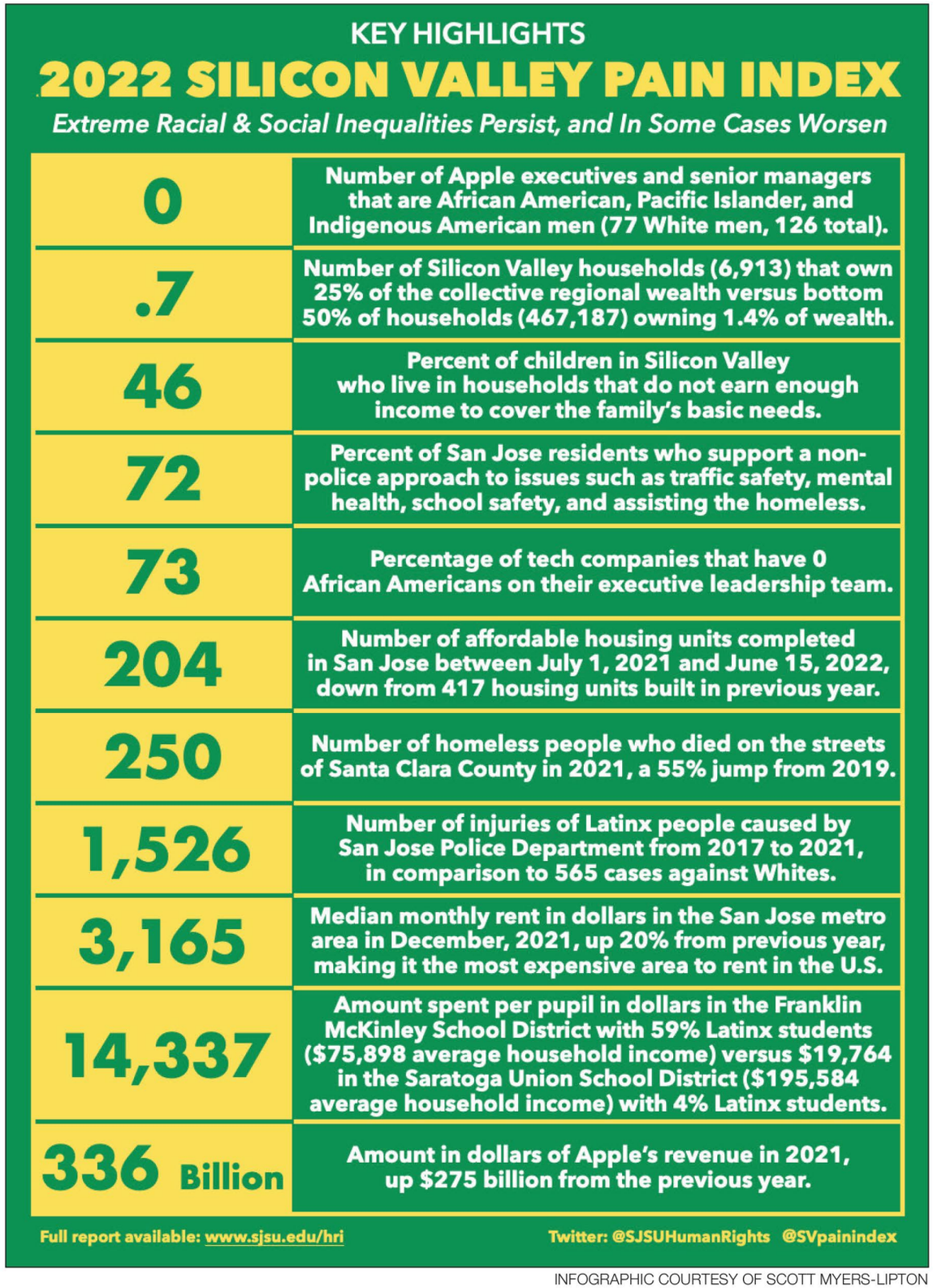
Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors declared it as a "Human Rights County" in 2018 – a title that Armaline and the Human Rights Institute wants to uphold.

"Each year, we try to organize around themes that make sense for that year in terms of what is going on in the communities," Armaline said.

In 2021, 250 houseless people died on the streets of Santa Clara County – a 55% increase from pre-pandemic levels, according to the 2022 Silicon Valley Pain Index.

In addition, 46% of children in Silicon Valley live in households that don't earn enough income to cover basic needs, according

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INFOGRAPHIC COURTESY OF SCOTT MYERS-LIPTON

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to the same report.

"We're producing so much wealth . . . surely we can provide enough for our essential workers so they can have the basics," Myers-Lipton said. "It is outrageous, heartbreaking and not sustainable."

In 2022, 42% of SJSU students have experienced housing insecurity, while 11.2% of the SJSU student body, around 4,000 students, have experienced houselessness, according to the same report.

Armaline said there were efforts to provide college students with a monthly grant in response to these statistics, but it was rejected by the state and county.

As a result of the 2022 Pain Index, he said the Human Rights Institute connected with Santa Clara County Senator Dave Cortese to produce a California bill that, over the course of five months, would give $1,000 a month to graduating high school seniors who are houseless or suffer from housing insecurity.

Armaline said, although the bill failed to pass for the state, it was proposed at the county level and passed unanimously.

"It would have been great if it passed at a national level, but we were happy to, at least, get it passed for students suffering in the county," Armaline said.

Myers-Lipton said the growing wealth gap in tech companies between white and POC workers is an example of how the wealthiest people in Silicon Valley hoard wealth in the county, instead of dispersing it back into the community.

"The amount of wealth inequality is not talked about and it is outrageous," Myers-Lipton said. "You have those top 10 folks making billions of dollars to the point where it's almost like a monarchy rather than a democracy."

He said there has to be a structural change in the big tech companies to ensure a change in the wealth gap between white and people of color in the field.

"It's not rocket science – you say to your senior managers who are mostly all white men that things have to change and your bonuses are going to be tied directly to that," Myers-Lipton said. "I believe that would bring a fundamental change in wealth in the Silicon Valley."

Of 126 Apple executives, none of the executives and senior managers are Black, Pacific Islander or Indigenous American men, according to the same report.

In addition, 73% of tech companies in the Silicon Valley have zero Black employees on an executive level and 39% of BIPOC and women workers in tech companies do not feel part of the decision making in these companies, according to the 2022 report.

"What we typically hear from tech companies is that it's hard to find that talent," said Jahmal Williams, co-chair of the Black Leadership Kitchen Cabinet of Silicon Valley. "We don't buy that it is hard to find talented Black people to put in leadership roles."

In hopes of bringing more attention to the annual report for varying communities struggling with social justice issues, Myers-Lipton said the documentary is currently being transcribed to Spanish and Vietnamese.

"To me, the most exciting part of the documentary was the humanity and diversity of our people," Myers-Lipton said. "You see the variety of people – across ethnicity and race."

In the documentary, Gliner captured families and individuals experiencing inequality in the Silicon Valley, ranging from low-income workers to houseless communities.

"All we're really doing is trying to hold ourselves, as a community, accountable for the commitments we've made," Armaline said. "It is a way to make human rights real in our lives."

The documentary will air on April 18 at 9 p.m. on KRCB (Comcast 200, AT&T 22, Direct TV 22) with repeats on April 19 at 2 a.m. and 2 p.m.

Editor's note: This story has been updated to reflect the appropriate language for referring to people of color. The Spartan Daily regrets this error.

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