The story goes that the flagpole was built in the mid-'50s after the local pharmacist and his wife got in a car wreck driving to Los Angeles. She was killed, he was significantly injured. The couple was of Japanese descent and, this being just after World War II, discrimination in many parts of the state and country ran high. But, as the townspeople telling me this story all said, not in Calipat. The pharmacist's neighbors visited him in the hospital, got his store keys, and ran his business while he recovered. They brought in a pharmacist from a nearby town to fill prescriptions, and local women volunteered to run the lunch counter. When the flagpole was erected, it was dedicated to Calipatria's neighborliness.

I saw evidence of that care soon after I arrived, at a fundraiser in the downtown park honoring a young Calipatria resident, Nate Mata, who died in a car crash nearly 20 years ago. Mata's father and his motorcycle-riding buddies lined beautiful Harley's along the edge of the park and watched over the BBQ preparations. His mom sold raffle tickets, the proceeds from which went to fund scholarships for local high school students.
students. Live music provided the entertainment. The park that surrounds the flagpole was filled with people honoring Mata. I saw many of these same people again at church the next morning, singing softly along with the choir.

Something about that attention to neighbors seems essential to Calipatria's survival, too. Luis Zendejas, who managed hardware stores in Imperial County before opening Zendejas Hardware with his sons, said making connections to his community is what made their business succeed even while big box stores pop up all over the region. He says when they first opened, he'd make after hours home deliveries all over the north end of Imperial County, way up east of the Salton Sea, developing customer loyalty. His son, Jeff, says those values remain; their customers return because they're remembered. It's especially important as the recession continues and people here are more financially strapped. He says, "Some guys they come to tell you their problems, they just want to be listened to, even more than buying a lock or bolt or something."

Next door at the Fair Store, Art Valdez watches over the business he and his wife have run for 30 years, and that's been in his family for 60. It's a men's work clothing store, and it used to sell mostly farming equipment. As agriculture's economic dominance waned here, Valdez and his wife have stayed in business by knowing their community and catering to its growing industries. He showed me neat stacks of industrial work shirts and pants with double knees, used by pipe welders at the nearby geothermal plants. But the largest portion of the store is dedicated to law enforcement uniforms, which he supplies to employees in Imperial County's two big prisons (including one in Calipatria), sheriff's departments, and border patrol units. He estimates law enforcement uniforms make up 60% of his sales now. He'd like to see Calipatria grow from its 3,000 residents to about 10,000, which he says would attract more businesses but wouldn't change the small town feel that much.

But the future of this town is very much in question. Many Imperial County residents prefer to move to the towns of El Centro or Imperial with more abundant malls and shops and restaurants. Many of the employees of the newer industries like geothermal and solar and prisons live in these bigger towns. They spend money in Calipatria at stores and gas stations, but don't add to the property tax base. Visiting contract workers certainly keep the hotel bustling. But as more geothermal plants come in, and solar farms get constructed, people here hope that locals will get jobs and those coming in from out of town will live here, at least until the temporary work is done. David Pearson, the new dean of San Diego State University's Imperial Valley campus, dreams of expanding the nearby satellite campus into a center for the study and training of renewable energy, a place for students to learn and get hands-on experience at nearby plants and for business people and scientists to visit. But a recession is a tough time to consider expanding state university programs.

I didn't set out to do a story about renewable energy, or about Calipatria. All I knew is that I wanted to spend time in Imperial County, a place I (a native Californian) had only driven through, and knew very little about. I did know it was a sparsely populated border county (it has 160,000 residents while Mexicali, just across the border, has nearly 1 million), and started my reporting looking for small towns whose proximity to the border
shaped their economies and identities. I called mayors, city council members, reporters, and countless (very helpful) educators. I had an email string with about fifteen people involved with immigrant rights and detention facilities, and talked with border patrol agents. But in terms of small towns here, and what could shape their futures, people kept telling me about renewable energy: geothermal, solar, some wind, biomass. And lots of Imperial Valley residents, who say national media coverage of their high unemployment rates has lacked context and nuance, are really hoping that the natural resources here, and their proximity to two huge population centers that need lots of power, will drive an economic recovery here.