

Handlebar Toys Icon Passes

By Andrea A. Firth

For the past 38 years, Freda Mary Challis helped parents and kids throughout Lamorinda to pick the perfect birthday present, find a favorite toy, and get rolling on a new bike. As the proprietor of Handlebar Toys, one of the oldest retailers in Lafayette, Freda was a well-known fixture in the community. “She loved the community of Lafayette. This was her home,” describes Freda’s daughter Jennifer, an artist now residing in Oakland. Working up until the day she was hospitalized, Freda Challis passed away following a brief illness on January 15th, 2008.

Born in Yorkshire England in 1923, Freda did not like to tell people her age. “She always acted younger than her chronological age,” notes Jennifer—not surprising for someone who spent her life surrounded by kids and toys. After marrying, Freda emigrated to Canada with her young family for an eight year stint and then found her way to Lafayette in the early 1960s’s. Freda and her former husband, John Booth, established Handlebar Toys in 1970 in the historic Pioneer Building in downtown Lafayette. Jennifer

remembers her mom spending much of her time at work and play at Handlebar Toys. “She loved that store. That was her passion.” In the 1980’s, Handlebar stopped selling bikes, and Freda took sole control of the business focusing on the “tried and true” quality toys that were a trademark of the store. Although she loved the central Lafayette location at 3535 Plaza Way, Freda was a pragmatic businesswoman; and in April of 2007, Handlebar Toys relocated up the road to 3631 Mount Diablo Boulevard in the shopping center with Diablo Foods and Trader Joe’s. The family is currently evaluating options for future plans for the toy store.

Also a talented musician, Freda performed in piano in recitals and taught piano lessons for many years. She also played the organ at several area churches. Always active in the music community, Freda served as President of both the local Music Teachers Association and the Performing Arts Society and was a member of the Berkeley Piano Club. In addition, Freda actively supported new interventions for the diagnosis and



Freda Mary Challis Photo provided

treatment of autism after her youngest child, Jonathan, was diagnosed with the condition. Freda is survived by her three children, daughters Jennifer and Adrienne and son Jonathan; two grandchildren, Robert and Andre; and a brother, Brian Challis.