

The Young Queens and Kings of Chess

By Jean Follmer



Sara Saba & Colby Suppinger play chess

Photo Jean Follmer

Lamorinda is home to a growing number of young chess players, both girls and boys alike. The presence of The Berkeley Chess School in our communities has made chess more accessible to new players. Active in more than 150 schools in the Bay Area, The Berkeley Chess School was founded by Elizabeth Shaughnessy in 1982. At the time, Elizabeth agreed to teach chess voluntarily in the Berkeley schools. To her amazement, over 80 girls and boys attended the first session. As a former Irish women's chess champion, Elizabeth understood the value of making chess available to children and to girls in particular. Elizabeth says "We do quite an amount of girls' stuff. Chess is a man's world and there's no reason that it should be." The School offers eight regional chess tournaments, includ-

ing two all-girls' tournaments each year.

The benefits of playing chess have become increasingly well known. The School teaches "critical thinking, problem solving, how to deal with winning and losing, and other skills which affect learning in the classroom." Similar to learning a language, chess skills are more easily acquired in childhood. Shaughnessy said they "teach how the pieces move in one lesson with kids," but it takes 6-8 lessons for adults to learn it. The School offers classes to kindergartners and up, but feels the kindergartener who is ready for chess is a "rare child." This is due to the level of concentration required in play and time in school makes 1st grade and beyond a natural entry point for most children.

Lafayette resident Sonia Shiri enrolled her daughter, Sara

Saba, in chess camp last summer. Although disappointed that Sara was the only girl, she was pleased that Sara chose to continue. Dr. Shiri says chess is "a good fit for Sara...she's a very curious kind of child and loves board games." Shiri says chess "offers another dimension of quiet concentration to plan, execute and see the consequences of what they did." Sara, a Springhill 2nd grader says she likes "that you have to think a lot to do it...the planning and trapping...the whole part of it." Shiri contacted The Berkeley Chess School to establish an after-school chess program at Springhill. She says, "I thought it would be great to have it here, on site." The Springhill program has a current enrollment of 18 students, four of them girls. Shiri says it "helps to have a girl in there. Having Sara here helped get other girls in."

She hopes the program "will attract more girls by showing there are girls out there playing." Sara agrees, "It's pretty good to have girls around." The presence of both girls and boys brings balance to the class atmosphere. Shaughnessy says, "Girls like the sociability of it and boys don't at all. Girls tend to make friends with the person they played" and the boys "tend to make it very competitive."

The School's involvement with Lamorinda is long-standing. Shaughnessy mentions that Sam Shankland, a 16-year-old Orinda resident recently won the Falconer Award for being the highest ranked player under age 18. Sam studied with The Berkeley Chess School years ago at Glorietta Elementary. The Falconer Award is sponsored by Lafayette resident Niel Falconer, a former senior chess champion of the United States.

The Berkeley Chess School offers classes in many of the public and private schools in Lamorinda. Classes are also regularly available at the community centers. Shaughnessy mentioned the School is always looking for monetary and voluntary contributions. She said "25% of the population gets reduced rates" for low-income, family discounts, etc. The School is also very involved with Title I schools throughout the Bay Area. For more information, please contact www.berkeleychessschool.org.