

Trifecta – Orinda Resident Works in Lafayette & Worships in Moraga

By Jean Follmer



Dot Feist, Orinda

Photo Jean Follmer

Orinda resident Dot Feist grew up in an Irish Catholic home in Brooklyn, New York. She eventually began working in Manhattan and found the atmosphere “so intense, I walked to the beach each night” to relax. One of five girls, Dot and her best friend went to visit Dot’s sister in Laguna Beach, California. They loved the Southern California beaches even more than those in New York and soon moved to Laguna Beach together.

Not long after moving to Southern California, Dot met Jim Feist at a jazz event at The White House Restaurant & Nightclub in Laguna Beach. Jim grew up in Montclair Village in Oakland and was in Southern California visiting friends. Jim returned to Montclair, but the distance couldn’t keep them apart and it didn’t take long for Jim to propose marriage to Dot. He said “I’d rather call you my wife than my girlfriend.” Jim’s family was from Sweden and he married Dot two years later in the Swedish community of Svedahl in Salinas. They had a big turnout at the wedding with Jim’s relatives flying in from Sweden and Dot’s from New York. Dot said “Most of my family came out – lots of Irish firefighters.”

After they married, the Feists moved to Albany and then to Hayward. They had two children – a son, Jack and a daughter, Dawn. Jim owned B.J. Supply Company in San Francisco and Dot stayed home with the children during their first few years. Eventually Dot “went to work part-time. I didn’t want to work (away from home) full-time, so I opened a daycare and ran it for about six years.” Dot was “the room parent at the Hayward school and I became very involved with schools.” They weren’t happy with the

direction of the Hayward schools, so they decided to move to Orinda in 1993. Dawn entered Glorietta Elementary and Jack entered Orinda Intermediate School. On the move to Orinda, Dot says it was “a wonderful change, a most positive experience.” She shuttled her children to Scouts and sports and the family loved to ski and sail together. She again became involved in the schools working in Alameda as a teacher, at Glorietta in the after care program and then helped open Joyful Beginnings Preschool in Lafayette in 1995 as its Director. Life was good until 1996 when Jim was diagnosed with leukemia. Jim battled his disease, but it got the best of him and Jim died that October. “Dawn was about to turn 12 when Jim died, so I was basically a single parent. I focused on my children and my work. After Jim passed, the community was unbelievable, they were so supportive.” Each year, Dot volunteers for Light the Night. Last year, she and Dawn went to San Diego for the marathon. Dot ran the ½ marathon and Dawn ran the full.

Dot attends mass at St. Monica’s in Moraga. She says “I used to teach CCD – I go there on a regular basis. I love my pastor, he speaks to my heart.” Dot has also been going to Glide Memorial in San Francisco for over 20 years. She goes there every Easter to help feed the homeless.

She is still the Director at Joyful Beginnings. She was hired by Ginny Leavitt in 1995 and says “I couldn’t have done it without Ginny”. She stresses how supportive Ginny and Pastor Lori Sawdon have been to her and to the preschool. Dot is very proud of the Joyful Beginnings program and attributes its success to her staff and the loving environment they create for the children. She describes it as a “creative curriculum in which you use the whole environment to teach the children. My focus is that you give children a strong sense of self-esteem and help them develop social skills. If they’ve mastered that by the time they leave (for kindergarten), it enhances their critical thinking skills and helps them think outside the box. I encourage children and let them have freedom and choice.” The Joyful Beginnings program is enhanced by yoga classes, visits from Pastor Lori, Lafayette Library visits, cooking and field trips throughout the year.

As for the future, Dot says “I’ll definitely be here for awhile. I’ll always be in this field and I plan to spend more time with my parents. Her sister recently moved to Orinda and Dot helped her start a toddler program at Lafayette Christian Church called Creekside Toddlers. Her son is currently working in the area and her daughter is finishing her nursing degree. Dot believes she is “truly blessed, I love my life and I’m really grateful for the community I have here.”