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• Life in LAMORINDA •

Transplanted Family Enjoys New Grounds

By Moya Stone



Lica Handa with daughter Jane

Photo Moya Stone

I pull up in front of the Lafayette home and see Lica Handa waving to me from the

large front window. Waving back I spot a spry little girl running around Lica, clearly excited by

the prospect of a visitor. When I reach the front door, we all exchange animated greetings and the warm welcome makes me even more interested to get to know Lica and her family.

We met while rehearsing in the St. Perpetua Church choir. There was little time for chats, but I did learn that Lica moved to the Bay Area from Japan with her

husband and daughter. A concert pianist, Lica had a much better command over the sheet music than I and she came to my aid from time to time.

There are two things that stand out in the Handa home: the grand piano in what would be the dining room and three-year-old Jane. This is an apt reflection of Lica's new life in Lafayette. "We lived in Tokyo. I was playing concerts and always in a hurry," explains Lica, pausing briefly. "There wasn't much time for Jane, but now I have much time for Jane." After the hustle and crowds of Tokyo, Lica is enjoying the slower pace and vast space of California. She says she loves the greenery and flowers surrounding her home and the more moderate weather.

Lica's husband, Mitch works as a trader for Barclays Global Investors and was transferred to San Francisco in November 2007. The family lived in the city briefly while they researched where to settle. "I wanted the American suburban experience for my family," says

Mitch, who has lived in various places around the U.S. and like Lica, appreciates the open space and weather in Lafayette. "This is the nicest place I've ever lived."

While Lica and I visit, Jane bounces back and forth between us and her dad in the other room. Sporting a cute bob hairdo, she tells me she likes her preschool and has made lots of friends. Jane was only a year-and-a-half when the family moved and she had a little trouble adjusting. "She'd wake up and cry," says Lica. "She didn't know where she was." But now Jane is happy. Recently she was baptized at St. Perpetua Church. She goes to Old Firehouse School every weekday, which is when Lica gets a chance to practice the piano and practice her new passion: baking.

Lica takes me into another room and shows me two shelves of dessert cookbooks, all in Japanese. She bakes twice a week and shops at Diablo Foods for the ingredients. Tiramisu is her latest creation and Mitch says she's enjoying the big kitchen, a rarity in Tokyo.

Suburban lifestyle suits Lica, who was born in San Diego but moved to Tokyo when she was three months old. Her father studied engineering at UC San Diego for three years and then returned to Japan to work for the Ministry of Defense. Lica started playing piano when she was four. At 12, she went on tour to Canada, the U.S. and Mexico. That's when she knew she wanted to do this for life. "It was exciting," says Lica. "I thought, oh, this is a good world." For six years in the 1990s, she lived in Munich studying piano. Back in Tokyo she taught piano and performed.

Now Lica plays piano for St. Perpetua and she'd like to volunteer to play for retirement homes, which she did in Japan. When she's not tickling the keys or baking goodies, Lica is trying her hand at gardening and writing a blog as a way to share her American life with her family in Japan. Before I leave, Lica plays Bach's Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring, which is as much of a sweet treat as her tiramisu.



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Drugs and Alcohol Take Toll on Local Teens

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"[If a friend is really intoxicated], you don't want them to sleep, and you need to be sure they're responsive to pain like a pinch or a slap in the face," Gadda says. "Teens will often tell friends to go take a rest, but that risks there won't be someone there if something goes wrong. Clearly, if everyone's intoxicated, who's going to notice?"

Gadda has seen another alarming trend as well: An increase is non-medical use of prescription drugs among older teens, and the combining of the two substances. "This depresses their system even more and increases their risk of death," she says. "Prescription drugs in Lamorinda are widely available and easily accessible. Stimulants are available from friends with ADHD, kids can get Tylenol with codeine, and over-the-counter medications."

Dr. Alex Stalcup is the medical director at New Leaf Treatment Center in Lafayette, and says we are dealing with an epidemic in prescription drug use. "This is a public health catastrophe," he says. "For many, many Lamorinda kids it's beyond experimentation, it's a part of their life. This is a local example of an emerging national problem."

A recent report released by the director of the National Drug Control Policy stated that "unintentional deaths involving prescription opioids (pain relievers) increased 114 percent from 2001 to 2005, and treatment admissions increased 74 percent in a similar four-year period."

According to Stalcup, Adderall sales (the drug used to treat ADHD) are happening with kids as young as elemen-

tary school. "They think it helps them study, but it makes you high and you get the illusion you're brilliant when you take them."

The patients Stalcup sees are not troubled youth, either. "These kids are athletes and top students who tried tobacco once or twice, and know what drugs feel like. We have kids passing out in class, in blackout situations. I have one patient with an OxyContin habit equivalent to shooting up double doses of heroin, and another patient with a Xanax addiction worse than I've ever seen. This is a situation that's suffered in silence."

A key problem is that non-medical use of prescription drugs seems very innocent. "Mom takes it for her back; Dad takes it for his neck. It must be safe, right?" Stalcup says. "Unfortunately, prescription drugs feel way too good, and kids find out they like the pills. They hang out unsupervised in friends' family rooms, share pills and experiment quite a bit. It takes six weeks to six months or a year before it becomes a problem. Kids think, 'I can get high, sit in class, no one knows... I don't smell.'"

According to the NSDUH, 64 percent of teens ages 12 to 17 who have abused prescription pain relievers say they got them from friends or relatives, often without their knowledge.

Once these teens realize they have a problem, often after severe withdrawal symptoms begin to emerge, it's too late for an easy fix. But the consequences of not getting help can be dire.

This is not just another 'drug du jour,' added Stalcup. "Pain killers are life-changing drugs. Once you've crossed the line of needing the drug, you're in a new risk group. It's the most fatal addiction by far," he says. "Withdrawal symptoms (unable to control bowels, sweats, shakes and terrible pain) would bring a grown man to his knees. The brain isn't developed until age 18, so changes the drugs make on a developing brain may not be fixed. We're playing roulette

with brain development."

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, nearly one in 10 high school seniors reported taking Vicodin in the past year without a doctor's approval. Teens are also abusing some over-the-counter drugs, primarily cough and cold remedies that contain dextromethorphan (DXM), a cough suppressant, to get high. From 1999 to 2004, there was a seven-fold increase in cases related to the abuse of DXM reported to poison control centers nationwide. Most of these cases were among 15- and 16-year-olds.

"This is a desperate situation we're in," Stalcup says. "But there is a way to treat the withdrawal symptoms. My message to kids is, please don't go through withdrawal without treatment. Get the necessary help."

For parents, Gadda says start educating kids at a young age about alcohol, substance abuse and even sex. "If you don't tell them, someone else will."

Signs of Alcohol Poisoning

According to the Mayo Clinic, treatment for alcohol poisoning consists of providing breathing support and intravenous fluids and vitamins until the alcohol is completely eliminated from the body. (Even if a person has stopped drinking, alcohol continues to be released into the blood stream and the level of alcohol in the body continues to rise.) Symptoms include: confusion, stupor, vomiting, seizures, slow breathing (less than eight breaths a minute), irregular breathing, bluish-tinted skin or pale skin, low body temperature (hypothermia), and unconsciousness. It's not necessary for all of these symptoms to be present before you seek help. A person who is unconscious or can't be roused is at risk of dying. If the person is conscious, call 1-800-222-1222, and you'll automatically be routed to your local poison control center. (All calls are confidential.)

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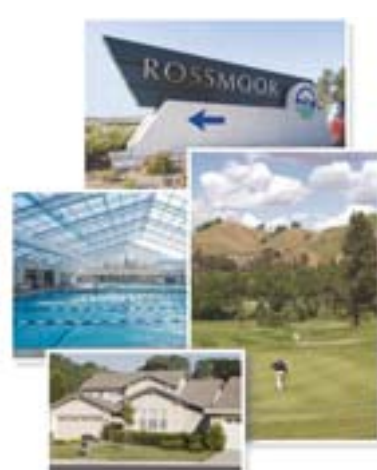


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