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From Queen in Sebastopol to Mayor of Moraga - The adventures of Karen Mendonca

By Sophie Braccini



Karen Mendonca Photo Clay Serrahn

Karen Mendonca was 16 years old when she was crowned Sebastopol's Queen of the Festa do Espirito Santo in 1970. The pretty teenager led the procession that Americans of Portuguese descent have held annually for 100 years in Sonoma County to celebrate the merciful Queen Isabella of Portugal, who gave back so much to her people in the late 13th century. This sense of community involvement and leadership has been the signature of the woman who was elected Moraga's mayor for 2011.

After a successful career in higher education and with the support of her husband of 27 years, Clay Serrahn, Mendonca stepped up to her new role as mayor with a calm and assured demeanor and set an ambitious to-do list on behalf of the little town she has made her home. "I have no personal agenda other than what is best for the town," Mendonca states, "I hope to be a positive facilitator for the Council to make progress toward our goals." (See our Dec. 22 issue for a list of Mendonca's goals, <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0421/Moragas-New-Town-Council.html>.)

On the day that Mendonca was elected to Moraga's top Town Council post, her family was in the audience. Her mother and sister still live in Sonoma County where she grew up. This proximity allows the Mendoncas to maintain their strong family ties.

Mendonca's parents came from immigrant families and were in the first generation to be born in America. Her father's family came from the Azores, a volcanic Portuguese archipelago located some 1000 miles off the Portuguese coast. The family settled near Sebastopol, where a large Portuguese community still resides. Mendonca's mother is of Austrian descent (from what is now Slovenia). "My parents were always giving back to their community," says Mendonca, "it was just their way to live their lives."

Mendonca was the first in her family to go to college. She started close to home at Santa Rosa Junior College then transferred to the California State University (CSU), Chico, to get her Bachelor's Degree, her K-12 teaching credential and first Master's Degree. Since she wanted to teach, counsel or administrate she got a second Master's Degree in Counseling and Educational Psychology at the University of San Francisco.

Mendonca started work at Santa Rosa Junior College as a counselor, but when Proposition 13 passed, many such positions were cut. For a while she taught 8th grade math in Sebastopol. "It was a lot of fun teaching where I grew up," says Mendonca, "and I was on the same faculty as my former third grade teacher." She continued counseling part-time in Santa Rosa until she was offered a position as Assistant Director for Career Development at CSU Stanislaus.

In that post she was offered many opportunities for career growth, including executive fellowships, and she decided to complete her PhD at UC Berkeley. "I did my research in the Graduate School of Education's Program in Policy and Management Research," she says, "it was a terrific program that combined policy, law, micro-economics, finance, management, and political science."

Mendonca's dissertation studied the careers of female presidents of universities across the United States. Mendonca interviewed many of these 43 Presidents (1991). "They were very generous women," remembers Mendonca, "all of them infused with an incredible passion for what they were doing. They all knew they had a special place and a purpose to fulfill."

From 2000-2004, Mendonca held appointments at the CSU Monterey Bay campus, first as Associate Vice President for Budget and Planning, then as Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs. "Clay and I had a commuter marriage, seeing each other only on weekends," she says, "so when I had an opportunity for early retirement, I took it."

Mendonca wanted to give back to Moraga, where she and Clay had a home since 1991, and it was not long before she applied for a seat on the Parks and Recreation Commission. She says she soon started receiving calls from residents asking her to run for Town Council. "I was not really willing to do it," says Mendonca, and it was her mother who convinced her. "She said, 'whatever they throw at you, you can handle it, and you could really help,'" Mendonca recalls.

"I come from a very tight knit community with a culture of long term friendships," says Mendonca, "and to this day I'm in touch with friends from both elementary and high school. Clay and I love Moraga because it is a very similar community. It has so much potential and the residents also are the same type of generous people who want to give back."



Karen Mendonca Photo provided by Sebastopol Holy Ghost Society

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