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Fate Brings War Hero to Lafayette

By Cathy Tyson



Through a very extraordinary collection of events, Lafayette's own Citizen of the Year, Karen Mulvaney, was inspired to reach out to Louis Zamperini - former Olympic athlete, Army Bombardier, survivor of a plane crash and forty-seven days on a life raft at sea and a Japanese POW camp, also the star of the phenomenal best seller, "Unbroken" by Laura Hillenbrand. "I felt compelled to reach him," says Mulvaney.

The upshot of her introduction and subsequent meetings is a special invitation for him to come to Lamorinda for a fundraising event to benefit the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation. At 94, Zamperini might have said "no" for any number of reasons, but he agreed to fly up from Southern California for the event next week.

In January of this year Karen and Tom Mulvaney were on vacation in Kauai to celebrate Tom and his twin's birthday. Although she's usually healthy, Karen got quite sick and ended up spending most of her time in bed reading "Unbroken - A World War II story of survival, resilience, and redemption."

Karen Mulvaney and Louie Zamperini Photo provided

"The book was like a talisman - I carried it everywhere with me for weeks" said Mulvaney. "I felt like my father's memory had been

stirred and his voice reawakened." In what can only be described as an extraordinarily rare coincidence, the book outlines the many struggles of Zamperini that paralleled her father's journey. It was haunting - her father was a fighter pilot during World War II who was shot out of the sky, but ejected and lived, was captured by the Germans and was a POW in Germany. Both men had war experiences that left wounds.

In yet another twist of fate, Kauai was where Zamperini learned to fly. Mulvaney explained that it seemed strange to her, being bed-bound and reflecting on the story of Louie's time lost at sea. Being ill gave her time to not only read the book but also to ponder the struggles of her father and Zamperini and the complicated consequences of their war experiences. "I ended up being extremely grateful to have been sick in Kauai."

Because she was so moved by the story - she ordered a number of books and had them signed by Zamperini, who inscribed, "Be Hardy!" Thus started a unique relationship between the two; that led to a phone conversation, lunch and his acceptance of this speaking engagement. Mulvaney calls it a "powerful connection."

"To me, Louis' story is a life raft for others," said Mulvaney explaining the many lessons to be gleaned from it: "everybody struggles; nobody's life is entirely smooth. Louie's ability to forgive even the most brutal treatment by others is a lesson for all. His life-changing experiences and how he overcame them helped me understand my dad better," adding that she learned to, "embrace opportunities when I can. My hope is that Louie's story will live on and help others with their own struggles."

It will certainly live on in the phenomenal number of books sold and in this appearance in Lafayette. Mulvaney was so moved, she underwrote the cost of his speaking fee and travel arrangements, no small undertaking, "I wanted more people to have the opportunity to meet him - I wanted to give that as a gift." Turns out the date that is available, April 17, is the day after what would have been her dad's 88th birthday. The event, at Acalanes High School, is already sold out.

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