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History Warms Hearts, Spurs Smiles

Annual Historical Society Dinner offers trip down Memory Lane

Laurie Snyder



Brooks and Brad Stubblefield, co-owners of Loard's ice cream parlors in Orinda and Moraga, share their memories at the Orinda Historical Society's annual holiday dinner on December 7th. Photo Laurie Snyder

the three most popular of which are chocolate mint, chocolate showers, and mocha chip. The vanilla ice cream, which was donated for the evening's dinner and is Loard's main staple, is used in everything from sundaes to single scoop cones.

"That's the real deal," Brad announced as wait staff rolled out carts with dishes of vanilla ice cream.

Orinda Theatre - Heart and History

Opened by Donald Rheem on December 27, 1941, nearly three weeks to the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Orinda Theatre quickly became the gathering place for a community worried and wearied by World War II. News reels that were shown with movies of the time offered both reality and respite. Saved from demolition in the mid-1980s, the theater retains the original art deco touches of architect Alexander Aimwell Cantin.

Three of the Theatre's former ushers, Colette Kersten, Malia Martin, and Shellie Abbes Kirby, remembered special times spent there, prompting laughter and broad smiles from audience members.

Abbes Kirby, now a realtor associate with Coldwell Banker in Orinda, started at the theater in 1966 as high school freshman. Tickets were \$1.35 for adults and 35 cents for kids during her tenure, which lasted until 1971.

"We were called usherettes," she said. "We really worked for our money." Her dad, Frank Martin, made the "Coming Soon" fixtures in the theater that are still familiar to today's audiences.

"You Only Live Twice," "Valley of the Dolls," "The Graduate," and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" were favored flicks back then.

Kersten held the prized job of ticket taker, helping late arrivals find their seats with the help of her trusty flashlight. Describing the usherettes' uniforms and Go Go boots, she also recalled an unwritten rule - friends of the usherettes were permitted to snag free popcorn and Cokes.

"I was so impressed by the art," she said. Now an Energy Advisor with the California Public Utilities Commission, Kersten avidly collects Orinda Theatre memorabilia. "To this day, I can see the marquee outside my window."

"The whole place is a work of art," said Martin, part of the Santa Maria school's first graduating class and now owner of the licensed Orinda daycare, Baby Central. Calling the bathrooms "a whole other social experience," she described how high school girls would watch each other put on makeup from the sitting room area of the women's restroom. "I love the fact that the same chairs are still there. I'm so glad they have preserved that."

Kersten mused that she took up skiing after seeing "On Her Majesty's Secret Service," and inspired a few head nods as she said, "I think I saw Woodstock probably 20 times."

Multiple members of the audience offered their own choice memories, including clues to the theater areas designated by teens - and maybe a few adults over the years - as "make-out sections".

As audience members gradually filtered out, many remained behind swapping stories. Afterward, Williams

Goodwill abounded in the Fellowship Hall at the Orinda Community Church on December 7th when 80 friends of the Orinda Historical Society gathered together for the organization's annual holiday party.

Guests were greeted by images of the Orinda Theatre and a pink-cushioned chair and bistro table from Loard's, and dined on Filet Mignon with Bordelaise Sauce, Butternut Squash Lasagna, and Chicken with Tarragon Dijon Sauce as Lucy Hupp Williams, the Historical Society's President, welcomed the crowd.

The sweetest treat of the entire evening, for many, came as memories of times gone by were shared by the event's honorees and those in attendance.

Brooks and Brad Stubblefield, co-owners of the Loard's Orinda and Moraga ice cream shops, were the first to speak. "It's a lot of work and a lot of fun," said Brooks, as she talked about life and work.

Born and raised in Orinda, the Stubblefields attended and fell in love at Miramonte High School. Brooks' first job was at the Orinda Theatre; Brad worked there, too. Later, when one daughter landed an after-school job at a local Loard's, they realized they wanted to be part of a much-loved Bay area tradition.

Generations have stopped by Loard's parlors scattered across the Bay Area to sample the now nearly 40 flavors,

LAMORINDA WEEKLY | History Warms Hearts, Spurs Smiles Annual Historical Society Dinner offers trip down Memory Lane | Orinda commented that the evening had been one of the Society's most successful activities presented to date.

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