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Michelle Lacy takes the field as Orinda's new Director of Parks and Recreation

Laurie Snyder



Michelle Lacy, Orinda's new Director of Parks and Recreation, checks out the daytime activity near Orinda's tennis courts. "This place is busy all the time," she says of the Orinda Community Center and its neighboring park. Photo Laurie Snyder

"My role is to serve the community," says Michelle Lacy, the new Director of Parks and Recreation whose first day with the City of Orinda was January 3, 2012.

She's got a challenging task. With programs serving babies all the way up to seniors, and facilities that range from open space areas to landscaped medians and groomed playfields, and a diverse array of arts and cultural happenings, Lacy oversees roughly ten full and part-time permanent staff and approximately 30 additional temporary and seasonal personnel ensuring smooth operations across five major program areas - recreation, facility maintenance, facility management (rentals), parks and landscaping, and administration - while keeping an eye on the current fiscal year's projected budget expenditures of \$2,178,768.

Take the Orinda Community Center, for example. "This place is busy all the time," says Lacy. Parks and Recreation staff work hard to tailor activities and educational offerings to the specific constituencies they serve. Programs for seniors give older men and women vital opportunities to remain active and socialize. Traditional gyms cater mostly to young customers, observes Lacy. So community physical recreation programs are critical because they help seniors keep up their mobility at a reasonable cost. Many older Orindans also fend off the demon of isolation by playing bridge and engaging in other weekly

programs to stay connected with friends.

Teens are afforded a safe-structured environment where they're not pressured to do anything unhealthy or illegal.

Programs tailored to pre-schoolers and early elementary age children enable little ones to explore their world while fine-tuning their manners and learning how to get along with others in the wider world. While the kids are making friends, their moms are developing social and support networks.

"Parks and Rec just makes life better," says Lacy. "It brings neighborhoods together," enabling residents to play and spend time together and maintaining "the fabric of the community."

Lacy is well positioned to help guide Orinda's harmonic convergence. With a degree in organizational management and nearly ten years of experience as the Town of Danville's Recreation Services Manager, she was responsible for ensuring the smooth operation of seven program areas, 30 sports fields, five public buildings, a dog park, and a \$3 million budget - a budget that grew significantly during her tenure.

One other strong point in her favor is that she knows what it's like in the trenches. Although she had thought about becoming a teacher, she decided that there was a better path for her. So, she embarked on a career in Parks and Recreation, starting out as a day camp director and working her way up.

"I wanted to help people - wanted to work with youth and make a difference in their lives."

Orinda's Parks and Recreation budget has traditionally been a strong one with user fees playing a significant role in covering operational costs. To maintain the high standard of Orinda's programs and services, Lacy will evaluate existing programs to determine where improvements might be made and will also engage staff in long-range planning. She'll also be working to keep the development of the Wilder playfields on track for a June 2012 opening, a big project that has already occupied much of her first few weeks on the job.

One only needs to peruse the 234-page Bicycle, Trails and Walkways Master Plan to get a sense of just how busy Michelle Lacy will be managing Orinda's existing wealth of resources - resources that could expand even farther based on this ambitious and far-reaching plan which was developed under Lacy's predecessor, Todd Skinner, and adopted by the City in January 2011.

"Well maintained public spaces are important to the identity of the community," states Lacy, who notes that she also likes "to make kids and families smile." With significant resources at her disposal and support from a community that draws strength from its busy cultural and recreational scene, she'll have ample opportunity to do just that in the days and years ahead.

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