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The Fabric of Our Community

Laurie Snyder



Orinda Senior Village residents enjoyed food, fellowship, and opera at the Orinda Rotary's annual Valentine's luncheon. Front row: Marilyn Sherwin (seated) and Roshan Vallabh; back row, from left: Josephine Cao, Manochehr Rahmanian, Manijeh Zarifzadeh, Eartha Newsong, Shugar Bassett, Lupe Jimeno, Maryam Mojaver, Hazel Salessi, Masoumeh Gholamrezaee, Delafrooz Mostaghimi, and Ali Jahangiri. Photo Laurie Snyder

Machu-Picchu and Tikal. When meeting her at a California Independent Film Festival event, one would never guess that she's 80 years old.

"I have seen things. I have lived a very good life. I have been very lucky," says Lupe.

Born in Santiago and educated at the Villa Maria Academy there, which was operated by the nuns of Philadelphia's Immaculata order, Lupe later earned a degree in bilingual stenography and worked at Esso Standard Oil.

She first arrived in Miami on an immigrant visa in 1957, working there and living with cousins before returning to Chile where she married and gave birth to her first child. A second daughter was born in Miami in 1962.

As nationalized Americans in 1969, she and her husband were transferred to Guatemala, staying there until 1973 as part of his work with Ford International. Interested in the Mayan and Aztec cultures, Lupe studied archaeology and anthropology at San Carlos University and became knowledgeable about local textile artisans.

Next came Michigan - and then Puerto Rico. Two years in, Lupe and her husband divorced. She returned to Chile, where her daughters attended her alma mater before completing college in California. Her eldest is a degreed horticulturist; her youngest holds a Ph.D. in Psychology from Cal. They have given Lupe five beautiful grandchildren.

An OSV resident since 2004, she edits the newsletter, heads the Garden Club, paints beautiful watercolors, is called friend by area birds, and cheers on her grandson at area soccer games.

"This was, for me, heaven," says Lupe of her acceptance into the OSV community. "It was the big break of my life."

Dexiang Dong and Yiyun Cao

Yiyun Cao (Josephine) met her husband, Dong, at Shanghai Medical College. Working side by side to bring polio under control in lengthy careers many would call distinguished, they modestly tell friends they just did the jobs for which they were trained.

Born and raised in Shanghai, Josephine attended the American Missionary High School there en route to medical school. Dong was born in the province of Zhejiang, earning his M.D. at Peking Medical College before becoming a leader in basic virology research.

Assigned to Beijing's Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences at a time when Chinese healthcare providers were confronted with 30,000 to 40,000 cases of polio per year, they received critical research funding from America's Rotary Clubs to develop a modern laboratory in Kunming. China's supply of polio vaccine has been produced there since the 1960s.

"We spent a whole life for that vaccine," says Josephine.

Ten years ago, the nation received a wake-up call with the release of, "A Quiet Crisis in America," a 2002 report to the U.S. Congress by the Commission on Affordable Housing and Health Facility Needs for Seniors in the 21st Century. The "aging of America" was underway. By 2030, it was estimated that 70 million Americans would be 65 or older - a jump of nearly 35 million new seniors (from 12.4 to 20 percent of the U.S. population).

The report stated, "In a Nation characterized by care and compassion for the least fortunate of its citizens, the stark reality is that many seniors, after years of contributing to their country's defense and prosperity, find themselves seriously at risk of being ignored, forgotten, or destined for a room in a skilled care facility."

What do a teacher of MSNBC political analyst Rachel Maddow, two polio researchers from China, and a former Del Rey Elementary assistant teacher have in common? They are four of the vibrant threads in our community tapestry who now call the Orinda Senior Village home.

The Orinda Senior Village (OSV) is a rent-supported independent living community serving very low income seniors, tucked among the trees atop Irwin Way. It was built in 1983 with a loan from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development on 3.5 acres of land donated by the Orinda Community Church, which continues to sponsor the program.

Take Lupe Jimeno. Before her Del Rey days, she studied the Anasazi, ventured into the Amazon, and hiked

Josephine came to America on scholarship, conducting research at a lab in Berkeley from 1981 to 1984. Invited to return by her Berkeley supervisor, she coordinated additional studies from 1985 through 1988.

Four of her siblings became American citizens. One lives here in Orinda. Their daughter also lives nearby.

While in Berkeley, Josephine developed a special place in her heart for Orinda. The climate is not unlike that of Kunming where "all seasons are like spring." She and Dong may often be seen walking around Orinda Village. An on-call resident, she assists staff, visitors, and residents with translation while Dong serves as a frequent listening ear. They are the friends who arrive when needed to make things better.

Antoinette "Nanette" Weber

Oakland-born Nanette Weber is of the generation of educators who began their careers before America awakened to the disparity in earnings between our greatest entrepreneurs, healers, and artists and those who gave them the skills to make their dreams reality. Back then, salaries were low and retirement plans were not designed to ensure the security of a population that would live longer and longer thanks to scientific advancements.

Weber, 83, taught full-time for 43 years and part-time for another six. An educator at heart, she continued substitute teaching until she was 80. Helping to shape the minds of five current ABC-7 reporters, she also taught the future Rhodes Scholar and Oxford graduate we know as MSNBC political analyst Rachel Maddow.

And yet, Weber also thinks of herself as merely ordinary - a Language Arts and History teacher who went to work each weekday and just did her job - not unlike what many Orinda moms and dads do today.

Her father, a co-owner of Peterbilt Motors, was an Orinda Country Club golf champion. One of her daughters lives in Castro Valley, another in Santa Rosa. For a time, Nanette lived on Moraga Road and then in Lafayette until, finally, after more than two years on the waiting list, she was able to call OSV home.

She is still teaching all who will listen. "You don't know what life has in store for you," she points out. Many senior housing residents are simply hardworking adults who never made much money; others were forced to draw down savings in a difficult economy or because of catastrophic illness. They are grandparents, fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and friends. Some are married couples; many are widowed or divorced. Others are single men and women who never had the legal opportunity to marry or just simply never found that special someone. OSV is also seeing the impact of people losing their homes due to the economic downturn, adds Manager Diane Browning.

"There's a treasure here - part of the treasure of Orinda. It speaks well for the community," says Weber, that Orindans have shown the courage to care about those who have given so much to society and remain vital contributing members of society.

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