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Get Schooled About Your School Board Candidates

Laurie Snyder

This November, Orinda residents will vote for City Council candidates, for or against a sales tax increase, and to elect fellow citizens to the Orinda Union School District (OUSD) Board of Trustees. Four Orindans hope to serve on the School Board; only two seats are available.

The candidates will serve as role models - not just for the adults who will be voting - but for area children who will be learning about the importance of civil discourse in a democratic society. The children the board shepherds may one day become senators, physicians, athletes, artists, or retirement fund managers.

Class is now in session. Here are the candidates:

SARAH GENN BUTLER

Sarah Butler holds a degree in environmental planning, and has worked in both environmental consulting and property management. A 14-year resident of Orinda, she has two children; both have attended Orinda's schools since Kindergarten.

She has been involved with the Educational Foundation of Orinda and active as: a school site council member (five years at Glorietta Elementary and three at Orinda Intermediate School), and as a parents' club board member at Glorietta, OIS and Miramonte High School. She has volunteered for strategic planning, AHUSD Measure A parcel tax and county-wide 32nd District PTA legislative committees, and served as a legislative representative and co-chair, Las Trampas legislative team. "That actually gives me a broader depth of understanding," she says of these interactions.

She wants to continue Orinda's effective use of taxpayer dollars through conscientious oversight while improving communication and collaboration between all stakeholders.

Butler plans to "promote a vision for the Orinda Union School District for educational excellence and 21st century learning, while also being fiscally responsible" to "keep our schools among the top in the nation and give our children the academic foundation, technological education and experiences in the arts and music that will develop critical-thinkers, innovators and well-rounded students."

BEKKI VAN VOORHIS-GILBERT

Bekki Gilbert and her husband, Neil, have lived in Orinda for more than a decade. Their two children attend OUSD. A former tenured associate professor in Sociology and Social Services, Gilbert holds a bachelor's degree in psychology, as well as Juris Doctor and Doctor of Philosophy degrees.

Gilbert believes that her breadth of experience makes her uniquely qualified to serve. "I have attended many OUSD Board meetings. I have visited all five OUSD school sites - talking with parents, teachers and staff to learn about what they see as currently working well in the OUSD and their hopes for the future."

She encourages experimentation with teaching methods - but in ways that won't jeopardize an entire generation, and believes that parents, teachers and community members "should be treated as partners in the educational enterprise."

While it will be vital for the board to continue its already sound fiscal management, she believes it must become more creative in how funds are raised. And while "OUSD students have consistently achieved an outstanding record on the conventional measures of academic performance," she says more must be done to meet the changing academic requirements of the 21st century, particularly in "advanced information technology, critical thinking and project-based learning."

JASON LURIE

Jason Lurie holds a bachelor's degree in political science and communications and a Juris Doctor. A practicing real estate attorney, and Lafayette resident for seven years, he and his family moved to Orinda in December 2010.

"Our public school system is outstanding," he observes. "Whether the measure is academic test scores, which consistently rank among the best in the state, or less objective but equally important ways: nurturing teachers and administrators that provide optimal learning conditions; parents that volunteer their time and give generously to our Parent's Clubs and EFO (Educational Foundation of Orinda); and local businesses that sponsor and support our school programs."

He describes California's current financial situation as a "morass" which "threatens the quality of our curriculum, our small class sizes, the maintenance - let alone any improvement - of our physical facilities, the availability of elective programs, and the morale of our teachers and administrators." He believes Orinda's Trustees can and must overcome this challenge.

As a board member for a local non-profit, he also serves as the legislative representative for the Glorietta Parents' Club. "I have always been committed to a collaborative and cooperative work style, and that is exactly the spirit I will bring to the OUSD board if elected."

MATTHEW P. MORAN

Matthew Moran of Moran Supply, an Oakland wholesale plumbing distribution company, has served on OUSD's board for four years. The only incumbent, he is running again to help "a very young board. We need continuity."

Raised and educated in Lafayette, he has coached youth sports for 11 years, been a past Orinda Youth Association president, and volunteered for Orinda math breakout, character education, and other programs.

He is committed to giving every child an excellent education, and points with pride to Orinda's Columbia Readers

and Writers Program, which teaches students to not only think critically, but to articulate their thoughts in writing - a skill corporate leaders say will help kids secure good jobs.

In spite of funding declines, he says, "Our district continues to offer a full 180-day school year, small class sizes, and a broad curriculum including music, art, science, physical education, computer science, audio visual production, wood shop, and foreign languages" - none of which would happen "without the commitment and financial support of our parents' clubs and the Educational Foundation of Orinda."

Noting that "our schools are among the top in the state," Moran stresses that Orinda must continue protecting kids from funding cuts.

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