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A Lamorinda Powerhouse: Mei Sun Li

By Sophie Braccini



Mei Sun Li during her music and rafting trip in Utah.
Photo provided

Mei Sun Li's life reads like a heroine's in a novel. Intertwined with some of the 20th century's most important historical events, her adventures and personal tragedies have shaped this unique Lafayette resident.

Mei Sun Li was born in America to Chinese parents in 1938. Her father, who was sent by his family to the U.S. for graduate school, was from the city of Tianjin, in northeast China. "My mother was allowed to come with him, contrary to the tradition, because she had just lost her seven-month-old baby," says Li. The objective was to come back after graduation. But history interfered with the plans.

First, the second Sino-Japanese war ravaged their province of origin and interrupted communication with Li's grandparents; then World War II erupted. "After the war my father went to work in Japan with the bank that employed him. I think my father was still hoping to go back to China, but the progress of Chairman Mao and the Chinese revolution prevented this." Her grandparents and the rest of her Chinese relatives lost everything to the Communist Revolution.

Li has wonderful memories of her life in Tokyo, between ages 10 and 18, in post-war Japan. "It was a

fantastic time," she said. Attending school at an army base, she met math teacher Helen Dewey, an important character in Li's life who encouraged her, believed in her, and convinced her to apply to college to study math.

Li graduated from Vassar College in Poughkeepsie with a degree in mathematics. She recalls how hard it was to find a job commensurate with her skills. "Math? You're a girl!" was the usual reaction when she applied.

She eventually found a job as a statistician with the Public Health Department in Berkeley. "It was very gratifying," she remembers.

While in college, her path crossed that of an old childhood friend, Ted Rosenthal, after Li bumped into the young man's sister. "When we were in the fourth grade, we 'got married' at lunch time," remembers Li. They were engaged three months later.

It could have been a fairy tale, and for a while it was. Li had her children in 1963 and 1965, but in 1969 her 34-year-old husband was diagnosed with Leukemia. He was a very creative soul: he wrote poetry that was turned into a movie, "How Can I Not be Among You?" (The book is available on Amazon.) He eventually died, leaving Li with two young children.

"Life can have terrifying moments that drain you, but to live life fully and to recover and to be a survivor and to find joy is really what is important," says Li. "I've had a lot of trauma and drama in my life. We all die, and it is the decisions that we make moment to moment that are important. I would like my life to be an inspiration to my grandchildren."

After her husband died, Li reconstructed a very full and passionate life, with constant interest in learning new things, meeting new people, and giving back in many ways.

A few years ago, Li learned that her former math teacher who had taught all over the world, now in her 90s, was living in Iowa. Li got in touch with her, and found out she had undergone cancer surgery and was impoverished. Li flew to see her. Li organized her whole alumni, about 100 people, and raised the money to pay the teacher's medical bills.

The group continues to send their former teacher a stipend every year. "She was such a wonderful, warm-spirited individual who changed my life," says Li.

Volunteerism was always a big part of Li's life. Even when she had a full time job with Bank of America, she started a diversity team. "My first husband was Jewish, I have a very non-conventional background and enjoyed living in very international communities," says Li.

Li has given back to the Lafayette community that became her home 35 years ago by managing Senior Services for the City, starting the Spirit Van program, bringing in a Happiness Club, music performances, and a writer's group. She resigned after seven years in 2011 because of what she calls inflexible job restrictions.

"Life is about joy," says Li. Passion is probably the thread of her rich life. Li enjoys travel, most recently taking a week-long white water rafting trip with musicians in the Moab Desert in Utah that combined physical adventure and music. Today Li is learning to write music, she swims, drums, organizes her neighborhood for emergencies, and has started writing a memoir about her life. Her 99-year-old father is still active in southern California.

Hopefully, Li has inherited his longevity and many more adventures await her.

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