

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

By Cathy Tyson



Last year's Gala

Photo Doug Kohlen

Sharing a meal with celebrity authors doesn't happen every day, but organizers behind this year's Lafayette Library and Learning Cen-

ter Foundation Gala have something new and entirely different planned for their upcoming fundraiser, "A Literary Feast" on November 3.

The evening is all about "celebrating the work of two dozen authors from the San Francisco Bay Area who have contributed so much to our

knowledge and enjoyment of the written word," explains Board President and Event Chair Michael Gilson.

"This dinner is our very first of what we hope will become an annual event to raise funds to support the ongoing work of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center." Unlike every other library in the county and the vast majority of libraries across the country, "more than 50 percent of the total annual cost of the hours and support for our library is provided through the generosity of our donors, so this upcoming Author Dinner is an important source of financial support," says Gilson.

The authors have been "absolutely wonderful and responsive," says Foundation Executive Director Kathy Merchant. Well known authors as well as first timers will be rubbing elbows with ticket holders at each table, from Annie Barrows who wrote *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* to mystery writer John Lescroart, author of *The Hunter and Damage* and Gail Tsukiyama author of *The Samurai's*

Garden along with other titles.

With a massive tent over the front plaza entrance of the Library – cocktails within the library and a sumptuous sit down dinner served in the Community Hall by local catering and event planning firm SpringLoaf, it will surely be a night to remember. Merchant adds with a grin, the evening will have library related themes, "It'll be black and white and read all over."

For those unable to make it to the dinner, but who would still like to support the Library, a silent auction will be available for online bidding from the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation website, www.lllcf.org. Individual tickets and a few table sponsorships are still available for the event scheduled for November 3, starting at 6 p.m. Proceeds will benefit the programs, extended hours and building operations of the LLLC. Check the website for details and a complete listing of all 24 authors, or call (925) 283-6513 for information.

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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Questions with home care?

Even the best daughters need help sometimes...

Ask Vanessa

DEAR VANESSA:

I am the primary caregiver for my mother and am starting to feel a bit overwhelmed. Is there anything out there that can help take some of the pressure off of me but at the same time, not take over completely? I still want to be there for my mother and I just need help. Thank you in advance. GRACE

DEAR GRACE,

Caregiving is a demanding, difficult job. If you try to do it all and do it alone, you will feel overwhelmed. Using respite care before you become exhausted, isolated, or physically ill is a necessity; it provides short-term breaks that can relieve stress, restore energy, and promote balance in your life.

Respite care can take many forms but it boils down to two basic ideas: sharing the responsibility for caregiving and getting support for yourself. Respite care can be scheduled for as little as a few hours a day or as much as 24 hours. It can be as simple as providing companionship and a meal or as comprehensive as assuming all the responsibilities of caregiving for several days or weeks. Many people use respite care on weekends when they take trips or spend quality time with their children. Others use it on a daily basis. It allows the primary caregiver to take the time for herself or himself and know that a caring professional is looking after her or his loved one. Family members and friends may be able to help out while you run an errand, take a break, or even go on vacation. However, just as the burden of caregiving is often more than one person can handle--it can also be a tough process for families to share.

I'm sure that you take great joy in caring for your mother so she can remain at home but the physical and emotional consequences can be exhausting without some support. You need to pay attention to your own needs and to who you are outside of your caregiving role. Your health and resilience are critical for your mother's welfare; it is essential for both of you that you get appropriate help when you need it. Decide on the dates and times you want to take off and a caregiver can come to fill in for you. In-home care is popular for obvious reasons. The temporary caregiver comes to the regular caregiver's home and gets to know the care recipient in his or her familiar environment. The temporary caregiver learns the family routine, where medicines are stored, and the care recipient is not inconvenienced by transportation and strange environments. Assess your needs to ensure you receive appropriate respite. As a caregiver, is support what you need most? Or is it some regular free time? Keep track of your daily activities then make a list of the areas and times when you most need help. Identifying your mother's requirements, abilities, and preferences will help you find the right match.

Asking for support and taking care of your own health are vital to managing your role as a caregiver. You are an important member of your mother's health care team. And the best way you can take care of her is by taking care of your own health. VANESSA