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Dick Olsen, Moraga's 2013 Citizen of the Year

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Candace Olsen, Dick Olsen, Jennifer Olsen and Jeff Olsen Photo Andy Scheck

Renaissance man, gentleman, Citizen of the Year. Longtime Moragan Dick Olsen was lauded by friends during a dinner held in his honor at Saint Mary's College May 3.

Olsen is a well-rounded individual with interests in the arts, business and politics. Part of Moraga's public life since its incorporation in 1974, he could have been nominated Citizen of the Year many times over for his varied achievements - from helping shape the Moraga-Orinda Fire District to providing countless hours of knowledgeable, dedicated service to the town. But beyond his community service it is his character and personality that inspired the evening's speakers, bringing even the toughest among them to the verge of tears.

Olsen held senior leadership positions with Transamerica for 26 years -as vice president of corporate relations and also as director of the Transamerica Foundation; a position in which he gained a taste for the non-profit world, especially the arts, and started to have an impact on local institutions such as the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, and the UC Berkeley Young Musicians Program. Olsen continues to serve on the board of these non-profits, "I was never asked to leave a board," he

said with a smile. He also serves on the board of the Eye Research Foundation at UCSF Medical School.

Although Olsen's experience with Bay Area non-profits is impressive, he is Moraga's Citizen of the Year for another reason - his service to the town of Moraga.

"Thirty years ago I rode my bike to give a letter in support of my father becoming Citizen of the Year," recalled Olsen's daughter, Jennifer, at the award dinner. "It looks like it took you guys a really long time to act on it!"

Olsen's contributions began before the town's inception.

"When I moved to Moraga in '72 it was for the schools," said Olsen, who raised two children here; with his first wife, then as a single father, and finally with Candace, now his wife of 30 years.

He says the fact that Moraga was not incorporated became a concern when condominiums started sprouting up on the ridgelines and it became clear to him that the county's strategy was to make Moraga a community of condos and townhomes.

"The project that would have built freeways through Moraga had already been abandoned for a while when we moved here," he said. "Still, Moraga was set to grow to a size and with a model that was not what we were expecting."

Olsen found out that the town had a community association and he joined it. This group represented the town at county planning meetings, trying to stop the new projects. "They tried to put us at the end of the agenda to wear us down; but the three of us, Mike Cory (who would become Moraga's first mayor), Merle Gilliland and I kept at it," recalled Olsen. When a project for 1,000 condos, in what is now Sanders Ranch, came up for approval, 100 citizens showed up and asked for a moratorium on all Moraga projects until a transportation study could be completed. The county gave up and told Moragans that the best thing would be for them to incorporate.

Olsen was one of a dozen founders of Citizens Incorporating Moraga. After the town was incorporated, Olsen didn't run for town council. "I do not like to campaign," he said, but he continued to serve in many functions including a study of what police and fire services would be needed for the new town. "People today do not know that if Moraga is a safe place to live, it is thanks to Dick and all the study work he did that led to Moraga having its own police and fire departments," said Gordon Nathan, calling Olsen Moraga's "best kept secret" and noting, "It is also thanks to him that Moraga had the first joint fire/paramedic services in the East Bay."

Fire safety and emergency response hold a special place in Olsen's life that traces back to his father who, during World War II, was the oldest un-drafted man in Millbrae and served his town as a volunteer firefighter. "He would take me to the station with him when I was very young," Olsen said. "Then during my college years at Stanford I was a volunteer firefighter and relief hoseman." He even completed the firefighter recruit academy. During his military years he received advanced emergency medical training and served at Letterman Army Hospital.

When Moraga decided to form an independent fire district, Olsen was nominated and served on the board of directors for 12 years. He was also on the study committee that recommended the addition of Orinda to the Moraga Fire District to form the MOFD in 1997. He was elected to the MOFD board in November of 2010, but resigned in March of 2012.

His competencies and self-acknowledged perfectionism make him a go-to person in Moraga when the town wants to have something done. After chairing the Revenue Enhancement Committee that was created in 2009 he

turned his attention, and marketing expertise, to road repair and public outreach-culminating in the passage of Measure K, the 1 percent sales tax for the roads that recently took effect.

Olsen is also an accomplished concert pianist.

Council member Mike Metcalf drew from Deborah King's 10 Qualities of a Being a Gentleman to offer an emotional portrait-it seems that Olsen's integrity, respect for others, confidence, and wisdom are what make so many people proud to call him a friend.

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