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## Author's Life Far from Normal

By Cathy Dausman



Author Karl Schonborn speaks at a recent book signing. Photo Cathy Dausman

Is Orinda resident Karl Schonborn normal? Schonborn - debater, visual artist, motivational speaker, retired Cal State East Bay professor, husband, father and author of the newly published memoir, "Cleft Heart: Chasing Normal" - has journeyed far from the scarred school boy with a speech defect. "He has overcome a lot of obstacles," said Orinda Books employee Kathy Kerr.

Kerr said Schonborn "knows what it's like" to be bullied. The was born with a cleft palate and endured seven oral/facial surgeries as a young child. Each time his lip was re-cut. His facial imperfections and accompanying speech difficulties made him the subject of both verbal and physical harassment in school. His personal background and coming of age in the violence filled 1960s led him to study crime and violence and make it his life's work.

Although Schonborn said he didn't write his memoir as therapy, he does see an opportunity to reach out to those being bullied today, whatever the reason. Schonborn plans to use his upcoming book tour - with stops in Palo Alto, New York, Philadelphia, and New Haven - as a platform to educate parents about bullying.

"Prevention is the real key to stopping the bullying process," Schonborn said. Males often used their fists, to hurt others or retaliate, the author explained. Bullies often want to "puff themselves up by putting someone else down," he adds. "We're at the mercy of all the [verbal] code [s] that teenagers and tweenies use [on various social platforms today]."

Determined to "give back," Schonborn is offering himself as a speaker at facial surgery and speech pathology conferences. He made back-to-back local appearances the last weekend in October, the first at a book-signing event hosted at Orinda Books; the second as featured speaker for

an Orinda Community Church "Life Journey" forum.

Schonborn previously revealed his artistic side, something the author developed in defense of his early physical limitations, in an OCC gallery display of sketches and paintings. Anyone meeting Schonborn today would be hard-pressed to detect even a slight facial anomaly, or hear any nasal overtones marking him with what his early tormenters cruelly called "harelip" speech.

He writes about himself as someone who developed "risk aversion stemming from enduring a lot of psychic and surgical pain as a kid," yet Schonborn constantly took risks, allowing himself to graduate from Yale, enter medical school, and travel across Europe and the Far East before settling into marriage, a teaching career and finally a family.

"I'm blessed to have the outcome I did," Schonborn said, admitting he "lucked out" with good speech therapists. He marvels at the incredibly complex facial surgeries occurring today, saying they make cleft surgeries "no big deal."

Ironically, Schonborn notes there is still a tendency to show someone with facial deformities as evil. He cited a recent movie with a cleft palate villain as an example. Locals will appreciate the book's early 1950s Palo Alto setting, Schonborn's acquaintance with the Hewletts, Packards, and Joan Baez, as well as school friendships he developed with Olympic swimmer Steve Clark and politician John Kerry, whom Schonborn called "a skilled wordsmith and darned good debater."

"I think his story is an important one for our young people," said Joy Walker, who attended Schonborn's Orinda Books appearance. Asked about a sequel, Schonborn admitted writing book two "would be the ultimate catharsis," before quickly adding that he is "under strict orders [from his wife] that there will be no second book."

It seems the peace-loving professor of crime and violence has learned something about conflict resolution, perhaps even finding a bit of the ever-elusive "normal" he's often sought.

"Cleft Heart: Chasing Normal" (Wayman Publishing, 2013) is available at local bookstores. Visit the author online at [www.karlschonborn.com](http://www.karlschonborn.com).

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