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## A Story of Serendipity

How a simple act changed one local woman's life

By Michael Sakoda



Ana Maria Blaj

Photo Andy Scheck

When Ana Maria Blaj and her husband, Ronnie, bought the property on Moraga Road in 2005, they were planning on living in it. Instead, they followed their passion, and in February 2006, Moraga Retreat, the residential care home Blaj now runs, opened its doors for the first time.

"My husband's family ran care homes for 20 years. He was a paramedic when he was younger, and I think he always thought he'd do this," said Blaj. "We got the care home bug ... it took us over a year to do the construction on it and to get all the approvals from Moraga and the county and finally to go to the Department of Social Services to get the license."

Moraga Retreat holds the same licenses as Moraga Royale and Aegis, but the benefits of small care homes cannot be quantified. "In other states, care homes are non-existent," said Blaj. "We can take on people with behavioral problems who would be medicated beyond recognition at larger places and do environmental changes, like playing music while they sleep, that larger homes just don't have the manpower to undertake."

How Blaj came to run two care homes in Moraga (the second located on Woodford Drive) is, in itself, a story of serendipity that spans two continents.

In 1989, when communism fell in Romania, Blaj was a little girl living with her chemist parents in Bucharest, the country's capital, and she received a shoe box as part of Operation Christmas Child. "I was in music



class and the principal came in and told us we had received packages," said Blaj. "We went to his office, and he lined us up in front of them and said, 'Go pick one.'"

Ana's parcel contained a letter from a high school student in Greece, some markers, some gum, some chocolates and a pendant. "I didn't start wearing it until middle school,"

Blaj said, yet it was one of the only things that made the journey with her to America.

"I came to America with my parents when I was 16," she said. "We only came with two suitcases, literally, between the three of us, but that pendant is one of the things I brought. I loved it. It meant that the sky's the limit."

Ana and her parents settled in Colorado Springs, a far cry from the metropolitan Bucharest. "It was like taking a New Yorker and sending them to Idaho ... and we were thinking of going back, but my mom's friend, who lived in Fremont, invited us to California for the holidays," said Blaj. "We went, and went to the Romanian Baptist Church, and met about 300 members, and Ron, my husband, was one of them – and he was cute."

After getting married, Ana Blaj and her husband moved to Milpitas. He was working in fiber optics for a solar company in Silicon Valley, while she managed an insurance office in Hayward, but when the time came to buy a house, the couple began looking in the East Bay.

"We were first looking for homes in Woodside and on the Peninsula, but decided to be closer to the family," said Blaj. "My parents live in Brentwood and (Ron's) brother lives in Walnut Creek, so we bought the house here."

The couple and their three children – Sofia, 8, Mati, 5, Ari, 3 – live in Lafayette, and attend church at Calvary Temple in Concord, where Blaj's children are helping her pay it forward. "We try to teach our children to be very grateful for what they have," said Blaj. "They get Christmas presents for children of inmates through our church. Every November, we go to Target, and they pick out clothes and toys for needy children. It's humbling for them to walk (in) and not pick anything for themselves."

Each year, Calvary Temple participates in several outreach programs including Convoy of Hope, which collects over a ton of groceries and hosts an event where doctors, dentists, even barbers, volunteer their services to the underprivileged.

Blaj's journey began with an act of compassion, the shoebox, the pendant, and it has led her to a life of compassion, which can be summed up best by her, as she discusses her role as the proprietor of Moraga Retreat: "Families are losing their mom or dad in front of their eyes ... it's not easy ... a big part of my job is being there for the families ... being their advocates with doctors, with insurance companies, with home health agencies ... making sure their loved one is getting the care that they need. My job is to take care of the entire family, not just the resident."

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## Tunnel Vision

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MOFD crew inside the tunnel

Photo Nick Marnell

MOFD division chief Darrell Lee said that the tunnel's radio system was upgraded from line-of-sight technology to the digital microwave standards of the East Bay Regional Communication System, which is used by public agencies within Alameda and Contra Costa counties. "I can talk to somebody in that tunnel now from my office," said Healy, his office being nearly seven miles from the tunnel entrance.

Many other new fire and safety features were

added, including huge, loud jet fans that can replenish fresh air inside the tunnel in minutes. Healy said he was impressed with the installation of new crossing arms in front of bores three and four, which will provide instant closure of the tunnels in case of emergency. The most obvious emergency feature visible to motorists may be the new bore's 10-foot-wide shoulder, large enough to handle a disabled vehicle or an emergency vehicle.

Among the exercises conducted the week of Nov. 11 was a drill involving the new water system. An MOFD firefighter responded to a simulated car fire inside the tunnel, and she connected the engine's hose to one of the two new hydrants outside bore four. But there was uncertainty over which hydrant was associated with which standpipe. A congregation of firefighters, engineers and technicians who witnessed the drill suggested that the pipes be color coded to dispel potential confusion. And by the end of the week, they were. "Blue for high pressure, red for low pressure," said Caltrans engineer Jim Adair.

"That's why we go through these exercises," added Lim.

The fire and safety efforts and traffic management will be coordinated out of a new Operations and Maintenance Control building on the west side of the tunnel. The building will be staffed 24/7 by trained operators who must pass a test administered by the state fire marshal.

"It will make it quicker to respond, and for us to send the correct response," said Bijan Sartipi, Caltrans district director.

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