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Career Shift by Moraga Resident Focuses on What She Loves: Singing

By Amanda Kuehn Carroll



Vocalist Brenda Lin will perform Sept. 5 at the Lafayette Library Community Hall. Photo provided

When you meet Brenda Lin the first thing you notice is how open she is - her glistening eyes and animated expressions, deep dimples, frequent smiles and frank humor. You wouldn't imagine that this late-blooming performer spent most of her life painfully shy. So shy that her stage fright caused her to sing off key.

The youngest of nine children, Lin grew up in Feng-yuan, Taiwan surrounded by music. "That's the memory: music, music, music," said Lin, who vaguely recalls standing with her siblings in their well-groomed garden singing for the New Moon Festival.

Lin's father used to perform for local soldiers. Her mother woke her up by playing the radio. "My mom was very different," said Lin. "She loved American music and movies." Consequently, Lin grew up learning popular English show tunes. They are the same songs she sings today.

Though school friends begged her to perform, gradually Lin stopped singing. She thought someday she might return, but focused on her career. Lin finished a degree in international trade before immigrating to California, where she had a sister in San Francisco. Lin settled in Southern California, where she married, worked and gave birth to a daughter. In 1987 she received a bachelor's degree in business administration from California State Long Beach.

After divorcing in 1992, Lin and her daughter moved to Northern California. They stayed with Lin's sister, who was then living in Pleasant Hill. Lin's ex-husband moved also and the two raised their daughter in Moraga. Lin's ex-husband was familiar with her love of music. "From time to time he would say, 'What a shame,'" Lin recalled. When he had a stroke in 2000, Lin quit her job. She worked part-time for an insurance company and full-time as a caregiver. It was one of the hardest periods of her life.

"I knew I was depressed," Lin said. "I used to be a workaholic and then I couldn't do anything." Lin's ex-husband passed away in 2007, the same year that her daughter finished college at UC Davis. "I wondered what I should do," said Lin. "I didn't have anybody and had been out of work for so long." To make matters worse there was a nationwide recession.

Around this time Lin spotted a catalog for Diablo Valley College and saw a class for applied voice. "I'd never had music instruction like that in my life," she said. Lin was more than a little rusty, but loved her instructor. She took lessons for the next few years, still fighting the shyness that had always defined her.

Lin received encouragement from instructors and classmates, which bolstered her confidence. In 2008 one of her tenants, a cellist who had played with Andrew Lloyd Webber, encouraged Lin to sing publicly. He accompanied her at an Open Mic night in Martinez where Lin's rendition of

"Autumn Leaves" stunned the audience. Shortly thereafter Lin lost her job and turned to music as a professional venture.

"I thought, well, I could sing," said Lin, who began soliciting gigs in local communities. Though it hasn't paid much and has been hard to book performances, singing is its own reward. "Now that I'm getting older ... it's time to try to enjoy myself," said Lin. "And for me, music brings back my life."

Lin has been delighted by the response of her audiences. "When they hear the music they start to sing along," she said. Lin has been performing for the retirement community for three years and has just started to form connections with local libraries. This fall she will take part in the New Moon Festival in San Francisco's China Town, recreating the memories of her earliest performance. Lin's next concert will be held at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 5 at the Lafayette Library Community Hall. She will be accompanied by pianist Todd Netland, percussionist Rich Fongheiser and bassist Karl Hartmann.

"I'm not looking to be famous," said Lin. "I just hope I can keep on singing."

For reservations, go to brendalinsings.net or call (925) 631-1531. Tickets are \$10 in advance; \$15 at the door. All profits will be donated to Lamorinda schools in appreciation for all of the support they have provided to Lin and her daughter, Kari.

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