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Orinda Honors the Memory of Its First Mayor

By Laurie Snyder



Bea Heggie and her family, with the portrait of Richard Heggie. Photo Ohlen Alexander

"The new city of Orinda has a bright future. Our city council members-elect are dedicated both to maintaining all that we love about our community, and to making it an even better place in which to live." - Richard G. Heggie

Those were the words of Orinda's first mayor, sent to a local newspaper after he was elected to Orinda's first city council. It was a heady time. Richard Heggie had been a key player in helping the community incorporate. On March 14, 1985, 58.7 percent of voters turned Orinda into the county's 18th city with 66.6 percent selecting the city council as the preferred form of governance. As the top vote getter of the 17 Orindans who ran that first time, Heggie was named Orinda's first mayor. Joining him on that council were Joseph M. Harb, William Dabel, Aldo P. Guidotti, and Bobbie Landers.

Landers would go on to become mayor herself and, nearly three decades later, she was there when current officials renamed the second floor area in front of the Orinda Library in honor of the

man she called "a distinguished man of letters - my cohort, my fellow councilman, my friend."

The "Richard Heggie Plaza" dedication on Sept. 28 was led by Councilmember Victoria Smith. A former mayor herself, she welcomed residents, Heggie's family and other honored guests, and conveyed the praise of her fellow council members. "We have taken the extraordinary step of recognizing Mayor Dick Heggie with this plaza naming because his gifts of time and talent were extraordinary," wrote vice mayor Steve Glazer. Added three-time mayor and current council member Amy Worth, "Dick set the bar high for the city. He was always gentlemanly, constructive and forward thinking."

Heggie, who passed away in 2012, was respected by world leaders and neighbors alike, earning Orinda's Citizen of the Year Award and the Government of Belgium's Order of Leopold. (See sidebar for further accomplishments.)

He was "dignified, fair, respectful, honest, intelligent," said Landers. "You could not find a finer representative to start a city out on the right foot." After their council terms ended, the pair partnered to establish Orinda's Sister City program with the Czech Republic. "This August, we welcomed our 15th student from Tabor to study at Miramonte."

Former mayor Laura Abrams recalled first meeting him while working to save Orinda's art deco theater. It was "his prestige ... his personality ... his manner of being. It was his relationship with the community which enabled him to act on our behalf," said Abrams. Both he and his wife, Bea, gave so much, "and did it in a way that was gracious and inclusive and gentle and kind."

"I really got to know him well in 1984 when the whole incorporation effort started," said former mayor Joyce Hawkins. "We were the new guys on the block. It was very important for the community to have a standing, to establish itself. He was such a respectful person and was so respected himself." It was Heggie's expertise in diplomacy, she noted, which helped Orinda become a player in the county.

But marvelous as these speeches were, it was 120 seconds unseen by many which captured the day's true essence. Two preschoolers, making a beeline for the library in hopes of finding the

best book ever, were momentarily diverted from their mom-chaperoned mission by the sight of - cupcakes! As they buzzed around Heggie Plaza under the dazzling blue sky - heedless of the high wattage VIPs around them, they knew only that it was a great day to be alive in their hometown. And it was such flashes of clarity that were what Mayor Richard Heggie wanted for all of us.

Accomplishments of Richard Heggie, Orinda's First Mayor (abridged list)

Richard Heggie graduated from UC Berkeley while serving at sea as a World War II naval officer. He met his wife, Bea, at Cal and also earned a master's degree in international relations there. His 19 years with the Asia Foundation took him to Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Japan, and the Philippines. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, he led the World Affairs Council of Northern California. He was also:

President and Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient, Japan Society of Northern California

President, National Council of Community World Affairs Organizations

Regent and Wheeler Oak Award Recipient, University of California

President, University of California Alumni Association

President, Society for Asian Art

President, League of California Cities - East Bay Division

Vice President, Oakland Museum Board of Directors

Trustee, UC Berkeley Foundation

Chair, San Francisco Committee on Foreign Relations

Vice Chair, Chinese Culture Foundation

Director Emeritus, East Bay Community Foundation

Board Member: American Red Cross Bay Area, California Shakespeare Theatre, Institute of International Education - West Coast Chapter, International House - UC Berkeley, Kennedy King Scholarship Fund, Osaka Sister City Association

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[back](#)

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