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New Open Meditation Circle Widens in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



Participants in the Moraga meditation circle.

Photo Sophie Braccini

Feeling stressed or overwhelmed? A solution could be just around the corner – the new Monday morning meditation circle housed at the Career Wisdom Institute in Moraga.

The Buddhist-inspired and free-form practice starts with a few short words from whomever is leading the circle that day, followed by a half-hour silent meditation, with an optional discussion afterward. The circle is opened to all, from seasoned meditation practitioners to beginners.

“The five of us wanted to create a Sangha (Buddhist term meaning community), a place where people would come together to meditate,” says Monica Moore. “(This practice) brings a lot of stillness in my life and a feeling of community.”

Four women, including Moore, Sherry Berman, Leah Fisher and Gaby Gervais-Mozée, all knew Maura Wolf. “Maura and I have practiced (meditation) for the last two to three years with different groups of moms in Moraga,” explains Moore, while Berman knew her through the Saint Mary's Leadership Center, where Wolf works, and her own Career Wisdom Institute. They chose a place off Country Club Drive for a weekly gathering. All have experience with meditation, some for many years, and they all emphasize the pleasure of creating this new circle in their town.

The large room is flooded with morning light at 10:30 a.m., and a circle is formed with comfy armchairs and more spartan chairs; some bring their own meditation pillow where they sit cross-legged. The group, in their 30s to 70s, is welcoming, non-judgmental and mostly, but not exclusively, women. The session begins with a leader – sometimes Mozée, Berman, or Wolf – sometimes a guest speaker, asking if anyone wants guidance or wants to discuss something before the practice starts. When a bell chimes, silence falls on the room.

“It's invaluable to have something local at that time of the day; you can drop kids at school if you have kids, and find a group of people to meditate with,” says Julia Wolinski, who heard about the group on the Nextdoor Corliss neighborhood site. Fisher adds that it was a wonderful surprise to discover that there were so many meditation practitioners tucked away in Lamorinda.

All of the participants agree the space is grounding and peaceful. A.J. Brown, who's the associate business director at the CAPA dance studio, needed a place outside of home and work at least once a week to capture a moment of stillness in an otherwise chaotic life. “It's amazingly nourishing for the soul and the spirit,” she says. “It gives me an excuse to be still. At home or work there is always the pressure of everything that has to be


done, but here there is no guilt about doing something for myself.” Mozée adds, as one meditates, time expands, and in fact you have more time for the rest of your day.

For Jen Varela, meditation is a spiritual practice, a way of life that compliments any religion. The mother of five children ages 9 to 14 was diagnosed with Sezary syndrome, a rare form of cutaneous lymphoma, with a difficult prognosis; but the woman speaks of it openly and with no anger. “We have the ability to take things positively or negatively,” says Varela, “and I'm going to take it positively and positive things have happened because of it.”

She encourages her teen children to participate in a meditation group for adolescents, and so does Moore who has implemented a ritual in her own house. Moore has four children ages 7 to 16, and the family meditates every week together before going to Mass at their church; they also meditate every night before dinner. “I try to teach them to be more aware and create a space between their thoughts, their emotions and their actions,” says Moore.

Anyone interested in the group can come for the 10:30 a.m. practice on Monday mornings at 1036 Country Club Drive, Suite 100, in Moraga. A small wicker basket for donations sits by the door; donations are used to contribute to the space.

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The Tiptoes of Happiness

By Laurie Snyder

“When it all comes true
Just the way you planned
It's funny but the bells don't ring
It's a quiet thing.”
— Fred Ebb and John Kander

Born and raised in Little Rock, Ark., longtime Lamorindan Leslie Darwin O'Brien began singing when she was just 6 years old. “Our house was filled with so much joy; we had hardwood floors so the music resonated through the house – all sorts of music. I grew up listening to my dad's incredibly beautiful voice as he stood beside me singing in church. My sisters and I also put on shows for our parents.” By the time she was in ninth grade, she was touring nationally. “Music broadened my horizons.”

She finished school before embarking on a 15-year career in the entertainment industry. Supporting herself as a cater-waiter in between parts in Tony Kelly's “Faust” and other thought-provoking off-Broadway shows, she lived a life many others have lacked the courage to pursue. But as much as she enjoyed that time, she says, she “was incredibly lucky that life took a different path.” The Stanford grad found love with her husband, Tim O'Brien, welcomed three boys to the world, and now serves as the Director of Community Life at the Orinda Community Church. This past April, she and her husband joined with other Lamorindans to raise a significant sum of money to benefit victims of the Boston Marathon bombing.

In the midst of it all, fate came knocking. A friend serendipitously suggested that Moraga resident, Terry Miller, would be a perfect music teacher for one of O'Brien's sons. As O'Brien became better acquainted with Miller, she learned that he just also happened to be an internationally renowned bassist who has performed with everyone from Amy Grant to Debbie Harry, the Doobie Brothers, Jimmy Buffett, Patsy Cline, Emmy Lou Harris, Stan Kenton, and Vince Gil.



Leslie Darwin O'Brien Photo provided

In addition to a shared love of music, O'Brien and Miller have both founded successful youth education programs. Terry's Kids (tmkids.org) is Miller's nonprofit which is keeping music in San Francisco Bay Area schools while spearheading a music exchange program with Havana, Cuba this February. GirlPower is O'Brien's brainchild. (See “Orinda Community Church Aunties Up” in the Lamorinda Weekly's online archives.)

As their acquaintance grew into friendship, Miller began lobbying O'Brien to step out from the security of her church choir to return to solo performance. Her friends and fellow church members also nudged and prodded. “I could not have done this 30 years ago at all. I wouldn't have anything to bring to it,” says O'Brien. “I also couldn't have done it without their support and the support of my wonderful family.” Those who have already purchased the CD are calling O'Brien's sound soothing – something they pop in for their daily drive times and for lifetime in general. One friend even played the disc to ease the passing of a terminally ill relative.

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